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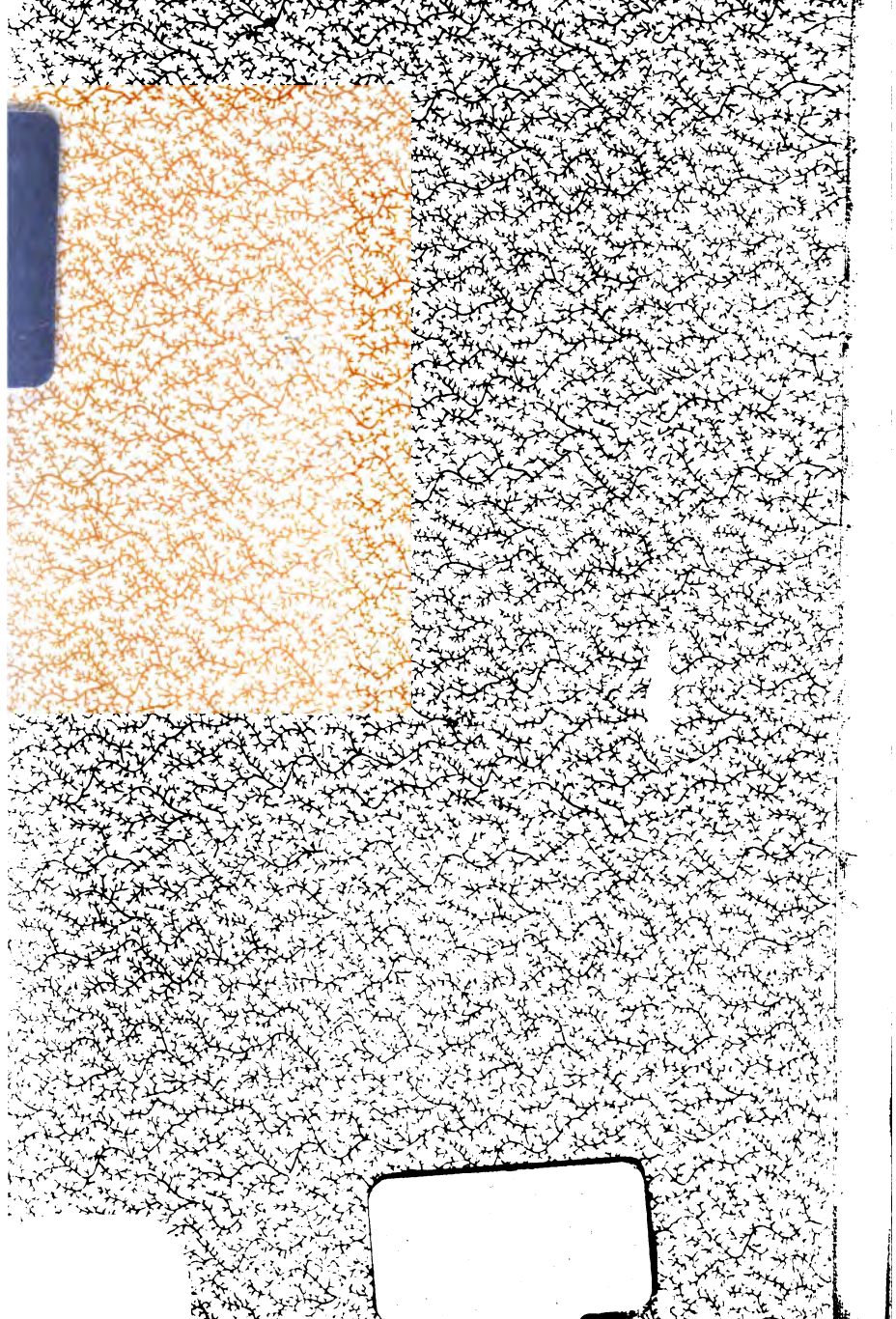
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HIS WAY AND HER WILL

By A. X.

A NOVEL

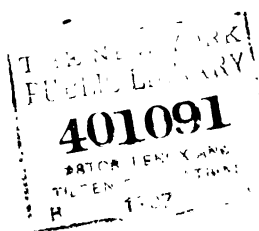
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TO
Mrs. General Butterfield,

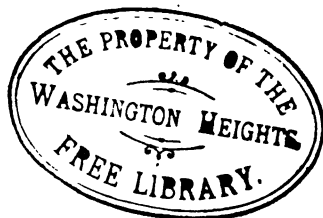
· WHOSE KEEN APPRECIATION OF THE
WAY OF THE WORLD
HAS BUT RENDERED HER

THE KINDLIER CRITIC
OF ITS FOLLIES.

NEW YORK, March 26, 1888.

3890 : Ap '00

ROY WEN
JLBN
VAGEL



HIS WAY AND HER WILL.

CHAPTER FIRST.

It was a rather pretty room, with a semi-studious, semi-fashionable air which was, however, overpowered to the observant eye by the fact that it served its occupant for sleeping as well as for receiving. This was apparent in the large handsome folding bedstead which stood by the farther side of the fireplace, and whose *raison d'être* was not to be concealed by the ornamental draperies, or the piles of photographs which littered the top.

There were chiffonnières for clothes, and reckless little tables with embroidered valances and hundreds of knick-knacks on them; vases, and bits of Dresden china, and albums, and travelling clocks, and plaques, and lamps, and banners, and—in brief, the whole modern paraphernalia which every woman, either in mansion, flat, or boarding-house, in these days feels bound to surround herself with. But above all things in this room there were card-receivers. Card-receivers on three legs stood by the door flanking the steam radiator on either side; card-receivers made of ormolu, gilt, china, shells, wood, wicker, brass, bronze, and glass confronted the beholder on every side, from every coign of vantage: and all were full, heaped up and overflowing. So that the fact became patent to the most casual visitor that the owner of this room was a person strictly “in society.”

This was the fact. Mrs. Martin Roosevelt Rose—or, as her visiting cards announced, “Mrs. M. Roosevelt Rose” (the Roosevelt, by the way, had been a purely accidental affair and not a family reminder when the late Mr. Rose was held a help-

less infant at the baptismal font)—Mrs. Rose, then, was indeed a person of fashion, and one who moved in the very and most aristocratic circles of that labyrinthine cosmopolitanism, New York society.

Had Mrs. Rose family?

No one knew anything of her antecedents save the one bare fact that she had been a Miss Martha Ward of St. Louis; so her social success gave the lie direct to any lurking idea that might have existed in the minds of ignorant people that birth or position was in any way necessary to a success such as hers.

Had the late Mr. Rose position?

None, save that of assistant cashier of a respectable bank during his lifetime, and an honest record when he was dead.

Had Mrs. Rose, then, money?

Merely a small certain income of fifteen hundred a year, and the uncertain and wavering sums derived from plying the pen.

Mrs. Rose, then, was an author?

She was, at least, a writer.

She corresponded regularly for one or two Western papers, and her letters were credited with usually containing that pungent flavor of personalism, that delicate aroma of profound appreciation of the belongings, entertainments, toilettes, equipages, and general affairs of her friends, which malicious persons had indeed been known to bluntly characterize in rather harsh language as "gross flattery."

On the other hand, if generous in one quarter, she was unsparing in the other; and did such a social anomaly arise as a hostess disinclined to receive the somewhat patronizing overtures of Mrs. Rose, this august lady hesitated not to launch upon the unfortunate rebel so many lines as would cause considerable astonishment, if not consternation.

Happily, however, these latter cases were rare, and everybody smiled upon Mrs. Rose, who in turn smiled upon everybody.

Besides Mrs. Rose's journalistic labors, she had, it was said, written a novel, although no one had ever seen it; she was also rumored to have translated erudite works from foreign tongues, and to have edited an octavo on theology. But most of her friends, and her enemies too, were obliged to take these volumes on trust.

Her letters were voted delightful, and her conversation was assuredly most entertaining.

For a few seasons past Mrs. Rose had given a series of lectures each winter—*recherché*, half-private, half-public affairs, where one only met one's own set—and where one, it is true, paid three dollars for one's ticket. But what were three dollars in comparison of being seen at Mrs. Rose's Readings?

A bagatelle.

And the money?

Oh—after expenses, the money always went to some worthy charity.

Nina Winthrop was once ridiculous enough to ask what "worthy charity" it chanced to be—and her aunt, Mrs. Odlorne, simply laughed and shrugged her plump shoulders, and repeated her niece's query as an excellent jest at the next luncheon-party she assisted at!

It being clearly demonstrated, then, that Mrs. Rose had neither birth, position, nor money—three of the first factors, here as everywhere, toward success—it may not unnaturally be asked, what had she, then, in their stead?

And it may be replied very briefly, concisely, and truthfully, that Mrs. Rose had self-assurance.

An unlimited—an unbounded—a—what Jerriss Redlon, the journalist, called—"bottomless pit of self-assurance."

She was bright, fairly well-read, with that seventh selective sense which some newspaper men have and use in their profession, and which a few women are endowed with, and employ in their struggle with the world.

Mrs. Rose could scan a crowded room, and, aided by this seventh sense, she instinctively knew what to assimilate to herself, what to refuse; she was, in fact, a species of human winnowing machine, and separated with the utmost deftness and certainty the social wheat from the chaff.

If a young man or young woman appeared on the scene, unknown and friendless, Mrs. Rose instantly sounded them with one glance of her eye.

If they had possibilities, she introduced them, patronized them, and made them her debtors forever after.

If they had no possibilities, she left them close to the wall where she found them, that was all.

If a rich person dawned, no matter how vulgar, she temporized with their unsteady grammar and ignored their provincialisms, took up the young people immensely, and impressed the whole family in ten minutes with the bland, pervading idea that in some mysterious way Mrs. M. Roosevelt Rose was the gate of that social paradise, New York society.

And in a way she was—one of the gates.

Certain it is that Mrs. Rose, living in the third floor of a second-class hotel in one room, had contrived, by dint of natural abilities and some remarkable opportunities, to place herself just in that exact position where her ample, suave, keen, insolent, unscrupulous personality was precisely one of the gates to New York society. And she knew it.

She sat in a large plush arm-chair this morning before a soft coal fire. It was still chilly, although the year was in April. One of the hundred or so little tables had been divested of its freight of card-receivers for the moment, and held instead chocolate, rolls, and broiled ham, with a fairly dainty service of silver and glass.

The chocolate-pot was empty, the clocks pointed to ten, and yet Mrs. Rose, more ample than ever in a loosely made morning gown of gray with pink linings, sat, apparently in deep thought, with her slippered feet toasting before the coals.

Mrs. Rose was in deep thought; but, contrary to the usual run of book-ladies under these circumstances, she did not hasten to relieve her mind by talking to herself.

She was perfectly silent, with occasional reference to a little leather note-book on her lap, and a glance now and then, half comical, half serious, at the open newspaper on the table beside her.

What Mrs. Rose thought, it is the happy privilege of the writer of this to be able to divine.

She reflected upon the last summer's eminently successful campaign, and upon the not so promising outlook for the one about to begin.

Mrs. Rose, in addition to her other talents—all of these well known to the world—was possessed of still another and even a

more advantageous one, which, if the truth must be told, was not half suspected by her set.

Mrs. Rose introduced.

Her introductions were most profitable, usually to the presented persons, and always to Mrs. Rose herself.

She had introduced two young ladies of fair position, some fortune, and with no acquaintances or chaperones in New York, to society there, with tact and success; receiving therefor a modicum of that lucre which their parents had accumulated. She had, the past London season,—for Mrs. Rose had the entrée of some of the best houses in the West End,—introduced a charming girl to Mayfair, if not to royalty itself, and had not only enjoyed as quid pro quo a six months' immunity from travelling expenses and hotel-bills, but likewise a very fair return in ready cash for her chaperonage.

Now this was legitimate enough.

Surely, no other commercial transaction could be even more strictly within received and accepted limits.

These were Mrs. Rose's grand affairs. She also not infrequently transferred her power of acquaintance in small doses for smaller considerations.

And so the Paris gown became possible; and the carriage to and from dinner-parties, soirées, and the like, not the unattainable it would perchance otherwise have remained.

To be plain and brief, Mrs. M. Roosevelt Rose traded upon her friends, bartered her acquaintances back and forth, and sold out social eligibles to each other with amazing alacrity and cheerfulness.

As has been said, the lady sat with a half-smile playing about her full indefinite lips, glancing at the open newspaper beside her.

She now took it up, and, the smile increasing, Mrs. Rose read aloud this:

"A gentleman of great wealth and respectable connections, from the West, will pay well, *to the right party*, for the introduction of his family into the highest circles of fashionable society in New York. All communications strictly confidential. Address *Society*, Box 183."

"Why not?" Mrs. Rose thought to herself. "I am sure there

can be no harm in my looking into the thing; and I can always withdraw if it appears impracticable. I wish the 'gentleman of great wealth' wanted his interesting family taken abroad. I hate to miss the jubilee year very much; but still, money is money here or there, and I fancy I can be able to manage the Wild West quite as capably as I have handled—some other people. *Nous verrons.*"

Mrs. Rose at once wrote a short reply to the advertisement, being careful to sign the note with a simple initial and to demand the advertiser's real name, address, and et cæteras, to insure further attention, and requesting the reply to be sent to the post-office box which she rented by the year.

For obvious reasons Mrs. Rose had found a post-office box quite a necessity in her career. It was annoying to have to go down to the city herself for her mail, but generally she had sufficient loose change to enable her to send a messenger-boy.

When she went out that morning she dropped her reply in the corner post-box en route to Mrs. Odlorne's luncheon-party. This was Monday. On Wednesday Mrs. Rose received an acknowledgment of a favorable nature, inasmuch as the sheet of paper bore the heading "Fifth Avenue Hotel," asked for an "immediate interview," enclosed a twenty-dollar bill—how eagerly her plump, well-ringed hand caught the money, and then, with reluctant but positive fingers, laid it back in the envelope!—and was signed "William Peck."

"If it had only been 'Bushel,'" Mrs. Rose thought, with a half-laugh, "I could have had them add another *l* to it and have made it quite presentable; but Peck! and no middle letters either! Well, at all events the man means business." She takes the bill again from the envelope, and holds it carefully up to the light; folds it, and replaces it with a sigh.

She appoints the following morning at ten, o'clock as the hour when she will see her correspondent; and at five minutes before the stroke, a bell-boy brings up to Number Thirty-nine the scrawling autograph of William Peck.

"Not even a visiting-card! How much I shall have to teach them!" And for a moment Mrs. Rose has the shadow of an apprehension that she may have to return the twenty-dollar bill to its last possessor, and relinquish her plans for obtaining

many more of the same denomination. Only for an instant; she is once more blandly confident of being able to launch anybody, no matter whom, if she chooses, and then the door opens, and William Peck comes in and carefully closes it after him.

He is a tall, thin, dark man of perhaps fifty-eight; a blurred, beaten face, not unkindly, very shrewd, utterly lacking in refinement or distinction of any kind. His clothes are expensive, his jewelry offensive, his hands ungloved, and his hat a soft one from Dunlap's.

"Good-morning, Mr. Peck." Mrs. Rose extends a welcoming hand, and touches an arm-chair lightly as she seats herself on the sofa.

"How do you do, ma'am?" William Peck says, the hot blood surging slowly but surely up and all over his lean throat and face and bald, narrow head.

"I must thank you, first of all, for being so prompt," Mrs. Rose says easily, arranging some fancied disarrangement of a tidy at the back of the sofa, thus averting her eyes from her visitor.

"Oh, I'm allers prompt—up to time's allers ben my motto."

"And a very excellent one it is, too." Mrs. Rose turns around toward William Peck reassuringly. "Now, Mr. Peck, you, I am sure, are a business man—"

"You've struck it right this time," he says, the color cooling a little in his lank face.

"I thought so. Well, then, to business. You desire to have your family introduced—properly introduced—in the very highest circles of our New York society?" Mrs. Rose, unconsciously or consciously, elevates her chin slightly as she speaks.

"That's about it," William Peck replies, catching nervously at one or two of the gold chains which dangle at his vest.

"Now, Mr. Peck, the first thing for you to do is to satisfy yourself that the person who has answered your advertisement is the right person, the person entirely calculated to act toward your estimable family as—as social sponsor."

"There was five answers, ma'am, and yours—that makes six."

"Yes—six; and may I venture to infer that you preferred and selected from the six, mine?" Mrs. Rose smiles sweetly.

"Jes' so," he says, looking at her for the first time. "At least, my wife and daughters seemed to settle it among 'em that your reply was most to the p'int."

"Thank you," Mrs. Rose gracefully nods. "Then you should at once, sir, proceed to assure yourself of my social position ; to assure yourself that I can do what I say I can—that, in short, you are not going to be humbugged."

"That's fair," William Peck says, smiling grimly. "But how am I a-goin' to find out? that's the ticket! I don't know any one in New York City except my banker, and two brokers, and the hotel-keeper, and the clerk, and the bartender. Reckon they wouldn't hev much to tell about you."

"They're just the men. Now, Mr. Peck, you take my advice and ask just those very men—you can do it in a cautious way, you know—what the social position and influence of Mrs. M. Roosevelt Rose is."

"What do you charge for yer advice," he asks, eying her curiously.

"I consider that my retainer came to me in advance, Mr. Peck," Mrs. Rose says gracefully, touching the envelope which lies between the pages of a book at her side.

"Oh, all right. Well, now, ma'am, jes suppose, for the sake of the argument, that I am satisfied as to your abilities and—and all that sort of thing ; would you mind lettin' me know how you're a-goin' to do it?" He looks off toward the windows that give upon the "mirth of Broadway," and once again resorts to his chains and charms.

Mrs. Rose straightens herself.

"Well, Mr. Peck, if you will permit me to advise you a second time, I should say to you, send your family to Europe first of all. Believe me, my dear Mr. Peck"—Mrs. Rose warms visibly with her theme ; a luminous vision of the London season, Paris fêtes, German baths, and what not else Continental besides! rushes before her eager eyes ; she leans confidentially toward her visitor as she speaks—"you do not know what a step toward social distinction six months abroad is ; you cannot imagine how almost indispensable it is to a family of position nowadays. I beg of you to take it into immediate consideration. My circle

in Europe is large, influential—the *crème de la crème*. Your family could not fail to enjoy the trip under my auspices.”

William Peck looks up quietly.

“They’ve ben,” he says.

“Oh,” with a falling inflection, “they have? That alters the case.”

“You see, ma’am, what I’m after ain’t that sort. It ain’t speakin’ French, and playin’ the pianner, and such like; it’s—it’s givin’ dinners with people as is somebody to set down with ye; it’s knowin’ folks as has got a right to their crests and their genealogy trees. It’s the tip-top article that I want, and no sham about it. I’m a plain man, I am; made my pile in Texas, I did. I own fifty square mile in the State, and each of my daughters has thirty thousand head of her own.” William Peck warms in his turn, being on familiar and also congenial ground.

“Indeed!” Mrs. Rose is interested deeply.

“Now,” William Peck continues, “will you jes’ say how you’re a-goin’ to set about it? Give me a few of the details, if you don’t mind.”

“Mind! Certainly not.” Mrs. Rose crosses one daintily slippered foot over the other on the hassock, and picks up a paper-knife to emphasize her remarks withal.

“First, Mr. Peck, I should spend, say, two hours a day with your family, so that we might, as it were, become intimate with each other; and also, in order that I might give them the benefit of my experience in a thousand little matters, ahem! perhaps as well imagined as described.”

“Jes’ so.”

“I might read with your daughters occasionally; accompany your wife and daughters to the opera—we shall still have a supplementary season at Easter,—concerts—and so on. I should, I think, recommend them to attend my last four readings. Let them be seen, my dear Mr. Peck, let them be seen with me here and there. A few judicious introductions preparatory to—”

“A grand ball,” William Peck interrupts eagerly, glancing at Mrs. Rose.

“Oh, no; by no means. That would possibly be the ordinary thing. I seldom employ ordinary methods.” Mrs. Rose

balances the paper-knife on a card-receiver daintily as she speaks. "No, Mr. Peck; preparatory to taking them to Lenox."

Mrs. Rose utters the word "Lenox" much in the tone that some other persons might enunciate "heaven," and lays down the paper-knife decisively.

"Where?" William Peck asks simply.

"Lenox," reiterated with a smile.

"Where is that, now?"

"It—well—it is in the State of Massachusetts, I believe." Mrs. Rose is slightly bewildered at being obliged to state the case so vulgarly.

"Oh, all right."

"Lenox is a summer—" falteringly.

"Summer-resort, I s'pose?"

"Oh, no!" shocked.

"Some kind of a first-class waterin'-place, mebbe?"

"By no means." Mrs. Rose looks ceilingward for assistance.

"Lenox is the—is—in short, it is the most exclusive spot in America—a group of exquisite villas and cottages owned or rented by the extremely aristocratic members of our *haut ton*."

"I see. Well, I reckon you'd advise my hirin' a house in Lenox, then, ma'am?"

"No, Mr. Peck, no; not this season."

"How's that?" he inquires, piqued.

"I will explain. This season, your first in the East, it will be the better policy for you to have your family at the hotel. I will be with them there. Had you a house, you would naturally wish to entertain. Knowing no one, or but few, this would be difficult, if not impossible; without the house, there is no question of entertaining, and by being in the hotel you are in exactly the position where I can introduce you to all my friends, who will naturally come there to see me, and whom I will invite to call upon you. Do you see?"

William Peck closes his eyes and smiles a broad smile.

"I don't want no ref'rence 'bout you!" he says, pulling out a heavily perfumed white silk handkerchief. "You're jest about the right woman in the right place."

"I am very glad you think so, Mr. Peck." Mrs. Rose bridles slightly.

"You are. Well, now, I'm satisfied—that's one half the business; the next half's satisfyin' you."

"I am sure—" began Mrs. Rose.

"No, you ain't, ma'am; no, you ain't. Now, what I want to know's this: how much do you value your services at? I mean the hull thing—two hours a day with 'em, escortin' 'em to the opera, introducin' 'em, goin' with 'em to what's 'er name—"

"Lenox," Mrs. Rose says.

"Lenox," he repeats; "doin' the right thing by 'em right through?"

"Oh," Mrs. Rose says, brushing an invisible fly from her gown.

"Speak out, do," William Peck says encouragingly.

"I—I really don't know, Mr. Peck."

"Who does, then?" bluntly. "I'm a-buyin', you're a-sellin'. You oughter know the price of your beefs, I'm sure!" William Peck laughs aloud for the first time since he entered Number Thirty-nine; he laughs so heartily that he fails to observe Mrs. Rose's changing color as she endeavors to join in his innocent mirth.

"But—" she murmurs, with handkerchief to her lips.

"Well, now, see here, Mrs. Rose: I might offer too little, and that wouldn't do; and I might offer too much, and then I'd feel kinder foolish."

"Oh, no!" deprecatingly.

"But look here, ma'am; now it all jest comes down to this: you're a-sellin' your friends, and I'm a-buyin' 'em. Now jes' you set your price, and I'll pay it."

"I really—I—"

For one brief instant Mrs. Rose is tempted to show Mr. Peck the door.

"Will five hundred dollars a month be the right thing?"

Her breath is almost taken away as she falters out a scarcely audible "Perfectly, Mr. Peck," and seeks strength in the paper-knife again.

"Well, now, that's settled. Sure you're suited?" William Peck eyes Mrs. Rose curiously.

"I am, Mr. Peck."

"That's right. How'll you hev it?—in advance?"

"As you please."

"I say fortnightly payments, and here's my banker's card. Guess you'd better drop in on 'em next time you're that way. Jest ask 'em if they know William Peck of Oliver, Texas."

Mrs. Rose takes the proffered pasteboard and puts it carefully in her pocket, bowing her thanks sweetly the while.

"When'll you think of goin' to—to—"

"Lenox," Mrs. Rose says.

"Lenox. Yes."

"About August."

"Thought you Eastern folks went into the country in June."

"Yes, we do; but not to Lenox. Even August is a trifle early, but I want Mrs. Peck to become domesticated at Curtis's before the season proper really begins."

"What's Curtis's?—the hotel?"

"Yes."

"And what do you calc'late to do in June when it gets pretty hot in New York?"

"I will reflect upon it, my dear Mr. Peck; and, depend upon it, I shall only advise what will be for the real interest and benefit of you and your family."

"Oh, I won't be here."

"No?" Mrs. Rose could scarcely repress the joyousness of her tone, but she did manage to smother it in an addendum with a falling and grieved inflection: "That's too bad!"

"No. I'm a-goin' to Brussels, and Berlin, and then up north to Rooshia. I'm goin' to represent a number of Texas capitalists on the dressed-beef idea. I shall be away from home 'bout—well, most of the summer and late into the fall."

"Dear me!"

"No. Well, now, Mrs. Rose, when'll you call on my wife and daughters?"

"Whenever you say, I shall be most happy." Mrs. Rose bends a mild and winsome eye upon William Peck.

"Well, now, I reckon this thing can't commence too soon. S'pose we name to-morrow—the Fifth Avenue Hotel, Numbers Six, Seven, Eleven, Fourteen, and Sixteen."

"And at what hour, Mr. Peck?"

"Well, I guess two o'clock's 'bout's good's any other time—two o'clock."

"Very well; two o'clock."

"Good-day, Mrs. Rose."

"Good-day, Mr. Peck."

"Oh, this is the twentieth. To-morrow I'll send you a check for a hundred dollars in advance to bind the bargain—'ll that suit?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Peck."

And William Peck quits Number Thirty-nine.

And Mrs. Rose picks up a hand-glass and smiles at her own reflection. Strange how, even in her most evil-minded moments, almost any woman will smile at her own reflection!

What a beatific smile, then, was Mrs. Rose's as she sank down on the lounge and reviewed the situation!

CHAPTER SECOND.

It was already the last week in August, and Mrs. Rose had, via Lake George, Saratoga, the Thousand Islands, Richfield, and Cooperstown, successfully piloted the family of the respected Mr. Peck to Lenox.

She had in certain ways earned at least some of the money which monthly found its way into her pocket-book; for assuredly no one could have been more assiduous in their care of the social welfare, in the establishment of a social status for some one else, than was Mrs. Rose on behalf of her new clients.

That she had made radical changes in these three ladies there can be no doubt.

Their toilettes were less conspicuous; their voices less loud and strident; their stationery less "ragged-edged," perfumed, and highly tinted; their French phrases very infrequent; their poses less demonstrative.

In short, where the family of William Peck had been too obvious to even the least observant, they were now merely unnoticeable,



Mrs. Rose had altered their livery from white and scarlet to a decent green of a dark shade, so that when the various landaus, victorias, tubs, dog-carts, and phaetons bearing their crest on the harness of the thoroughbreds, dashed about the Lenox streets, the men on the boxes and in the rumbles were not quite so suggestive of a coming Barnum as they had been when Mrs. Rose first made the Pecks' acquaintance in town.

With commendable ingenuity, she had, after surveying Mrs. Peck's uncompromising visiting-card, gently inquired if Mr. Peck had no middle name.

"No, none."

"And what may have been Mrs. Peck's maiden name, may I ask?"

"'Liza Drummond."

"Drummond!" repeated Mrs. Rose, joyfully. "Drummond! A fine old Scotch name."

"Yes," William Peck responded dryly. "Mis' Peck's father come from Aberdeen in 1846, and settled in the State of Missouri a sheep-raisin'. He died in '56."

This was sufficient.

After some slight parleying with the family, Tiffany received an order for stationery, and in ten days Mrs. Peck sat holding one of her own cards between a fat forefinger and thumb, gazing at it with a speechless content. It read thus:

Mrs. W. Drummond-Peck.

The Misses Drummond-Peck.

The next week's "Home Journal" contained a paragraph to the effect that "Mrs. W. Drummond-Peck and her two daughters, relatives of Lord Drummond of Scotland, would spend the summer in travelling with their friend Mrs. M. Roosevelt Rose, and would go to Lenox for the season."

The "Evening Telegram" not long after had among its list of outgoing passengers by the *Arizona*, "Mr. W. Drummond-Peck, the Ranch-King and relative of Lord Alexander Drummond of Scotland."

Who shall say who was responsible for these interesting announcements?

Mrs. Rose dictated the dismissal of the manicure as "too ut-

terly vulgar," and also the discarding of a French maid who could not comprehend her mistress's command of her language, and the substitution thereof of a discreet Englishwoman not unaccustomed to laying down the law on certain points pertaining to the mysteries of the toilette, and also enforcing them.

It may be inferred from these little and perchance insignificant details that the Drummond-Pecks were rather a biddable trio. Such was indeed the fact.

If their husband and father was ambitious for them, they were none the less so for themselves. Thoroughly convinced, as they were, of the absolute social sovereignty—so far as their purposes and needs lay—of Mrs. Rose, they were only too anxious to conform their every motion, movement, and idea to the code which she prescribed.

Mrs. Drummond-Peck, at the present moment, sat on the piazza of Curtis's, properly armed with an elaborate piece of fancy-work; the poor lady had neither acquaintance with nor liking for this species of thing, but nevertheless she bravely sat looking at it for at least two hours out of every twenty-four.

Miss Drummond-Peck, a young lady with a fine figure and a not unpleasant countenance, had surrounded herself with a novel bound to match her elaborate tennis-gown, a smelling-bottle, embroidery, bon-bons, a fan, and a racket, evidently prepared for almost any rural emergency.

Miss Josephine—Mrs. Rose had forever banished the familiar "Josie" of the girl's lifetime as "bad form"—stood irresolutely toying with a be-ribboned whip, and watching the infrequent passer-by.

Mrs. Rose was writing a letter to one of her newspapers, and sat near her protégées.

"Oh! Who is that?" Josephine jumps from irresolution into a high treble key of positive and animated inquiry.

"My dear," Mrs. Rose glances up with annoyance, "remember that you should never betray an ignorance of any one's identity who appears worth knowing, nor the slightest curiosity. That is a young lady whom you will, of course, meet, and before long too."

Mrs. Rose resumes her pen, and Josephine, instructed but not humiliated, for the tone was too low to be heard by any one but

herself, gazes after the retreating figure on horseback of the girl about whom she had asked.

A slight, graceful young creature who sits her white horse admirably, and whose bronze-brown braids, tightly crossed at the back of her shapely head, shine like gold in the sun; whose deep gray eyes sparkle beneath their black lashes; and whose whole air and pose bespeak at once gentle blood, gentler breeding, and a little flavor of wilful independence that might be regarded as delicious or exasperating, according to the beholder's sex.

She has a companion, a lady mounted on a roan which she manages with skill if not with dash, as it rebels at some caprice of the rider's; a tall young woman with a pale face, black eyes, and fair, curling, short hair—a picturesque woman, therefore not to be easily placed.

Why is it that a woman who is picturesque anywhere else but in her own boudoir and alone, is never easily placed? Is it, perchance, our inevitable tribute to the brevet of the conventional?

An artist would have said of her, "What an Elaine!" or, "What a Juliet!"

Josephine Drummond-Peck did not notice her at all; she was by far too much occupied with the cadet-gray habit of the younger girl, never having seen one before.

"Say, Ida," to her sister, "that's awfully swell, isn't it?" jerking the whip in the direction of the horsewomen.

"Yes. Who is it?"

"I don't know; don't ask. Mrs. Rose says we'll meet her soon."

"Yes, I will ask, too. Here comes Mr. Redlon. I'll ask him; he'll be sure to know."

Mr. Redlon saunters out on the piazza and up to the group. "Say, Mr. Redlon."

With all her best endeavors Mrs. Rose cannot and never will be able to banish "Say" from the vocabulary of the Drummond-Pecks.

Mr. Redlon approaches in deference to Miss Drummond-Peck's smothered tone.

"Who is that?"

His eyes follow hers, and seeing the riders for the first time, the color comes slowly up to his blonde, ugly face.

"That is Miss Louise Peale."

"What! the amateur actress that's going on the stage in the fall?"

"Yes."

"How that gray habit does become her, to be sure!" cries Josephine.

"Oh!" a falling inflection, "you mean the lady in gray? Oh that is Miss Nina Winthrop; Miss Peale is her guest at Winhurst."

"Is that so?" Miss Drummond-Peck finally removes her eyes from the losing figures, and offers Mr. Redlon the bonbons.

"Do, now," Mrs. Drummond-Peck urges heartily. "I do love to see folks eat. Them caramels are special good, ain't they, Ida?"

"Yes, indeed they are." Ida tenders the box, and Mr. Redlon takes one sweet and no more.

"Say, Mr. Redlon"—Josephine, with one eye placed upon Mrs. Rose, who seems just now lost in her correspondence and for the time being unmindful of the inquiring propensities of the Drummond-Pecks, and with the other fixed upon Mr. Redlon's paling face, draws her chair closer to the other three, and modulates her tones to suit the near-by ear—

"Say, Mr. Redlon, is it really true that that Miss Peale's going on the stage?"

"Quite true."

"Dear me!" sighs Mrs. Drummond-Peck, between a candied peach. "Seems as if all the young girls nowadays was possessed about the theatre, and they're no sooner amateurs than they're sighin' to be professional."

"I think it must be splendid!" Miss Drummond-Peck says enthusiastically.

"Is Miss Peale going to make her début in a play of yours, Mr. Redlon? [I think some one told me something of the sort," Ida adds.

"She is, Miss Peck."

"My!" cries Josephine, who, released from the controlling

leash of Mrs. Rose, now plunges into the catechism with an ardor redoubled from long restraint.

"What's the name of the play?"

"*The Brazilian*," Jerriss answers meekly.

"What an elegant title!" exclaims Miss Drummond-Peck.

"What have you called the heroine?"

"I have called her *Dolores*, Miss Josephine."

"How lovely! And does it end well?"

"Ah, that depends upon the spirit in which you view it."

"I s'pose Miss Peale's costumes for it will be from Worth's?"

"I believe so, Miss Josephine."

"Is she studying her part now?"

"Yes."

"With you, I presume?"

"In a way."

"Who's going to be the leading man—the lover?" Miss Drummond-Peck blushes as she asks.

"Sydney Trelawney."

"Oh my! He is just splendid. If I was in Miss Peale's place, I'm sure I should fall dead in love with him. Wouldn't you, Josephine?"

"Guess I would!"

"He is married, you know, and has four children," Jerriss puts in mildly.

"Oh, horrors!"

"I s'pose Miss Peale will make lots of money. How much a week do you think she'll get, Mr. Redlon?"

"I—I—really—" Jerriss hesitates.

"Josie!" exclaims Mrs. Drummond-Peck, reddening, and with reproval, "—phine!" adds the worthy matron, encountering the wandering orb of Mrs. Rose unconsciously placed upon her at this particular juncture.

"Well, mamma, I didn't mean—I'm sure Mr. Redlon knows I wouldn't ask anybody else in the world but him a single question; it's too unladylike. But, Mr. Redlon, you're always so kind and friendly, and—"

"I hope so, Miss Josephine." Jerriss bends a tender glance upon Mrs. Drummond-Peck's younger daughter.

"By the way, Mrs. Peck, does not the scenery hereabouts remind you a trifle of Scotland?"

"Well, I don't know, really, Mr. Redlon; we was in Scotland such a short time that—"

"Let me see, Josephine: we were in Scotland in the fall were we not?" interposes Ida, aptly.

"Yes."

"Of course; naturally," Jerriss says. "You were, I presume, at your cousin Lord Drummond's place for the shooting. I fear, Miss Peck, that you and Miss Josephine will find it awfully slow here by comparison."

"Oh, I guess not." Ida laughs as she draws a dawdling needle through a silken square of canvas.

"Not a bit of it!" Josephine exclaims warmly. "I just dote on Lenox; it's perfectly lovely!"

"Do you really prefer it to Knock-Erran?"

Is there or is there not a small twinkle of innocent mirth in Jerriss Redlon's light eyes as he makes this query?

"Prefer it to what?" gasps Mrs. Drummond-Peck, leaning over recklessly toward the young journalist and playwright.

"Knock-Erran," Jerriss repeats blithely, "your cousin's seat in the Highlands."

Mrs. Drummond-Peck falls back in her rocking-chair speechless; and happily, at this crisis, Mrs. Rose rises from her table and, perhaps scenting the skirmish from afar, swoops down upon the quartet, whose late conversation she may or may not have heard.

"Josephine, my dear, are you going to drive or not?" Mrs. Rose asks blandly, touching the whip.

"I guess—I mean—I think so."

"Oh, pshaw!" cries Miss Drummond-Peck, flinging down her needle-work. "I'm sick and tired of driving; let's go and take a walk." Miss Drummond-Peck rises and adjusts her sailor-hat at a more becoming angle.

"To walk!" echoes Mrs. Rose in an accent of severe and unqualified horror.

Jerriss picks up the novel and peers into it with fervor.

"Yes'm; why not?" Josephine says, laying down the whip,

and giving a dismissing nod to the groom who has stood at the horse's head for the last half-hour in front of the door.

"To walk!" Mrs. Rose sinks into a convenient chair which Jerriss has placed at her approach.

"Lor' me!" exclaims Mrs. Drummond-Peck, hastily. "She's faint! Here, Mis' Rose, smell this!" tendering a large cut-glass and silver flagon.

"Thank you, dear Mrs. Peck. I am not faint," gently declining the flagon.

"But, my dear girls, you are in Lenox."

Mr. Redlon holds the novel well up before his convulsed face.

"You can't walk in Lenox at nine o'clock in the morning!"

"Why, now, I should say that it was jest the time to walk, in the cool of the day, before the sun gets too hot."

"The sun, dear Mrs. Peck, really—" Mrs. Rose casts an appealing glance about her to all the four points of the compass, as though seeking aid from some external source—"really, I don't believe society takes the sun into consideration at all."

"Oh, oh!" chorus the girls in relieved voices.

"Ain't it proper to walk so early, Mrs. Rose?" Josephine asks.

"It is not."

"Well, now! only to think," murmurs Mrs. Drummond-Peck, "that the hours for walkin' is reggelated to a T!"

"Ah!" Mr. Redlon says, dropping the novel from his recovered countenance. "Society, my dear Mrs. Peck, is a queer structure, after all."

"It's lovely!" Miss Drummond-Peck says, with enthusiasm.

"Society," Mrs. Rose says loftily, settling a fat and well-conditioned hand on either broad arm of her rocking-chair—"Society is a—science."

Mrs. Drummond-Peck toys clumsily with her fancy-work; mute tribute to the Science in which she finds herself implicated.

"Quite as much of a science," Mrs. Rose continues, "as geology, for example."

"Quite as full of strata," Mr. Redlon interpolates, staring at the toe of his boot.

"Quite," Mrs. Rose assents briskly.

"Yes, of course," murmurs Miss Drummond-Peck, a trifle wildly.

"You are right, Mr. Redlon. In fact, you are too clever a man to be anything else but right."

Josephine looks up frankly and admiringly into Jerriss's face as he responds,

"Always, Mrs. Rose?" and laughs.

"Almost always," smiling.

"Come, now, Mis' Rose, when is Mr. Redlon in the wrong? I'd jest like to know. Seems to me he's jest about right, straight along!" Mrs. Drummond-Peck lapses from the fancy-work with cheerful alacrity.

"Thank you, Mrs. Peck. I can assure you I appreciate the having of such a champion as you."

"What ain't Mr. Redlon right about, Mrs. Rose?" Josephine persists, picking up the whip and snapping it at the tiny pug that struggles at her feet.

"Ah, Miss Josephine, thereby hangs a tale." Jerriss takes up the novel again.

"Oh, say, tell; do—please do!"

"It is simply this, my dear," Mrs. Rose says with a sweet but somewhat enigmatical smile. "Mr. Redlon, I think, is going to endanger his prospects as a dramatist by employing a novice as the exponent of the leading rôle of his first play—that is all."

"Why, Mrs. Rose!" Josephine exclaims with youthful directness. "Don't you think Miss Louise Peale just too lovely for anything?"

"Miss Peale is a very pretty young woman, my dear; a very effectively pretty young woman, too."

"She's an elegant actress, I'm sure," put in Miss Drummond-Peck, warmly.

"'Elegant' Miss Peale is, my dear Ida; that I will certainly admit; but as to her being an 'actress'" — Mrs. Rose shrugs her shoulders and elevates her outspread fingers in a very decisive pantomime.

"Don't you think she has talent, Mis' Rose?" Mrs. Drummond-Peck asks, with widening eyes.

"I do not," conclusively.

"How can she act so splendidly, then, and have everybody raving over her?"

"And I'm sure she's earned lots of money for charity and things!" adds Josephine in her sister's breathless wake.

"I declare now, Mis' Rose, she jest made the tears come up in my eyes the time I saw her play *Anne Carewe* in—what was that character in, Ida?"

"*The Sheep in Wolf's Clothing.*"

"Yes, of course; and if that ain't talent, Mis' Rose, I'd like to know what is!"

"It is susceptibility to a situation on your part, dear Mrs. Peck," Mrs. Rose replies calmly.

"Well," the other says vaguely, "p'raps."

"Miss Peale is clever, good-looking, and knows how to advertise herself better than any one I ever met in my life."

The warm bloods creep into Jerriss Redlon's face for the second time that morning on behalf of Louise Peale; but he is, so far, silent.

"How does she advertise herself, Mrs. Rose?" Josephine inquires eagerly.

"How does she not, rather say! By all such meretricious measures as endorsing patent medicines, piano-makers, song-writers, cosmetic manufacturers, certain hotels, certain dress-makers—"

"Oh, my!" exclaims Mrs. Drummond-Peck, her intonation chiming in sympathetically with Mrs. Rose's accent of disgust.

"You don't say!" Ida cries.

"Oh, pshaw!" Josephine exclaims. "What if she does? That don't make her have no talent."

"A talent for advertising, Josephine, my love," Mrs. Rose admits, smiling pleasantly at her own genial wit.

"Well, Mrs. Rose,"—Jerriss speaks at last, a little slowly, a little painfully, through his falling color, but quite steadily and earnestly, looking through his glasses,—“I happen to know that these people you speak of have all insisted upon presenting Miss Peale with boxes full of their wares, and that she has merely written them courteous acknowledgments of courtesies which—as she is about to enter theatrical life professionally—are part and parcel of the career of a favorite actress.”

"In other words, my dear Jerriss," Mrs. Rose says, warming to the subject, for she really enjoys a little wordy warfare with a worthy antagonist—and besides, Miss Peale is no favorite with her—"In other words, these little things all purchase popularity."

"Is popularity for sale?" Redlon returns quickly, "and at so low a figure too?"

"Ah, naughty boy! You know what I mean well enough." Mrs. Rose shakes a short forefinger at him playfully.

"I fear I don't," he answers bluntly.

"Let me tell you, then. I mean that I am too much interested in your welfare, I have watched your career with too much true amity, to wish to see you risk so much for—" Mrs. Rose hesitates for an instant—"so little."

"What do I risk?"

"My dear boy, now listen: you give into the hands of a pretty, clever girl, with some training, it is true, on the amateur stage, a rôle that—well, that Bernhardt might play with advantage to herself."

"Oh, my!" ejaculates Mrs. Drummond-Peck. "There's a feather in your cap, Mr. Redlon!"

Jerriss bows.

"I think Miss Peale will play *Dolores* both to her own advantage and to mine!"

"May she!" Mrs. Rose's tone savors far more of the spirit of evil augury than of happy wish.

"What does she lack?" Jerriss says after a pause, and more in the fashion of a man lacking something to say than otherwise.

"Experience." Mrs. Rose utters the word with closed and reverent eyes, poising her ten finger-tips together as she speaks.

"That will soon be remedied," the journalist answers lightly. "Forman, of the *Criterion*, has signed an agreement with her, engaging her for three years."

"Is that so?" Ida says.

"Um!" Mrs. Rose ignores Mr. Redlon's pertinent rejoinder and pursues the even tenor of her own thought. "Experience!" repeats the worthy lady. "What is there like it? Nothing. It is the basis of art, the foundation-stone of science, the great

lever that moves the social sphere and keeps it in its proper orbit."

Jerriss laughs.

"Why, Mrs. Rose, do you know," he says, looking at her quizzically over his glasses, "I've always fancied that enthusiasm was the basis of art, and inquiry the foundation-stone of science, and—money—the lever of the social sphere!"

Mrs. Rose laughs too. She is too clever to pursue this branch of the subject farther, and too honestly fond of Redlon to attempt to contradict him.

"Laugh at me, if you choose, you clever, good-for-nothing fellow! But I will stick to what I say. Louise Peale should not be entrusted with the rôle of *Dolores*."

"Oh, nonsense! I have no fears. I am sure my friends should not."

"But they have. What does a young society woman know of the lurid passions, the splendid hates and loves, the wild turbulent heights and depths of a nature such as you give your heroine! You remember, I read the play last winter."

"I remember. I can only say I am willing, anxious to entrust it to Miss Peale. For the rest, *nous verrons*."

"Verily."

There is a pause, broken only by Josephine snapping her whip-lash, and by Mrs. Drummond-Peck partaking of a couple of burnt almonds.

"And yet I don't know but that I have been unjust to Miss Peale," Mrs. Rose finally says, with a slow, unpleasant smile. "Perhaps she has had more experience—" with a disagreeable emphasis on this last word—"than I imagine."

Redlon looks up.

"Who is she?" The question is asked in that terrible, unmistakable tone which has ruined many a reputation, and which, in nine cases out of ten, is its own sufficient answer.

"Yes, who is she, anyhow?" Mrs. Drummond-Peck in some respects has proven a not inapt scholar; she has picked up with tolerable alacrity one at least of the stinging phrases of society's jargon.

"Who is she, anyhow, Mr. Redlon?" demands the cousin of Lord Drummond of Knock-Erran,

"Miss Peale is the only daughter of John Peale Rogers of New Orleans," he answers slowly, feeling four pairs of feminine eyes intently fixed upon him as he speaks.

"Oh! Is her father living, then?"

"No, Mrs. Rose. Mr. Rogers died when his daughter was fifteen."

"A good many years ago, then?"

"Quite a number."

"Um!"

"Why is her name Peale, and her father's Rogers?" queries Josephine, quickly.

"Her mother's brother left her a fortune some six years ago, conditionally with her changing her name to his."

"Ah, there is where the money comes from!" broke in Mrs. Rose. "I always wondered a little."

"And as soon as she got the fortune she took to acting, didn't she?"

"I believe so, Miss Josephine. I have only known Miss Peale a year and a half."

"Is that so?" Ida murmurs.

"Who brought her up, Jerriss? Do you happen to know?" Mrs. Rose asks carelessly.

"She had a guardian, I understand; and she was educated at Mrs. Reed's. Miss Winthrop and she were schoolmates there, you know."

"Considerable difference in their ages, isn't there?"

"Oh, yes, indeed—some years."

"I thought so. Didn't Miss Peale leave Mrs. Reed's rather suddenly?" Mrs. Rose asks pointedly.

"I really don't know." Jerris looks up blankly.

With the writer's ready head he is mentally noting Mrs. Rose's endorsement of question-asking when it suits her own purposes.

"I think—it seems to me—and yet I don't know—"

"Lor', now! what, Mis' Rose?" Mrs. Drummond-Peck allows the expensive embroidery to fall to the floor unregarded in this exciting moment.

"Perhaps I dreamed it," Mrs. Rose says sweetly, "but it appears to me that some one—was it you, you naughty gossipy

fellow?" shaking her pencil at Jerriss—"newspaper men are such sad chatterers, Mrs. Peck, dear—was it you, Jerriss, who told me Miss Peale eloped with some one during one of her vacations, when she was at the White Sulphur with her guardian and his family?"

"Oh, my!" cried Mrs. Drummond-Peck, feebly; "you don't say!"

"Is that so?" quoth Ida.

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Josephine. "She's too lovely for any such stuff to be true about her—now!"

"So she is, Miss Josephine," Jerriss says, with a kindly, half-grateful glance at the warm-hearted girl.

"Then you were not the person who told me, Jerriss?" Mrs. Rose queries sweetly.

"No," he shakes his head, "not I. By-the-bye, Mrs. Rose, did you hear with whom Miss Peale eloped?"

"A man."

"Naturally! but—" Jerriss Redlon is looking down, and he is pale—"I mean the name."

"Never even heard it, my dear boy."

"And so my leading lady is said to have a romance put away in her past, eh?" Mr. Redlon turns up a quiet, laughing face toward Mrs. Roosevelt-Rose.

She shrugs her shoulders and lifts her brows.

"Ah, Mrs. Rose, what a clever woman you are! and what a friend to the poor struggling playwright! How much better than stolen diamonds, Prince of Wales's endorsements, or Malay dwarfs and Indian tigers—is—" Jerriss rises—"a dim-distance elopement! Kind patroness, now I am sure that in Miss Peale's hands *Dolores* will prove the success of the year. And how can I thank you for your invention of this morning?"

He takes Mrs. Rose's plump hand in his and imprints thereupon a chaste—although perhaps not an altogether holy—kiss.

And Mrs. Rose feels that Mr. Jerriss Redlon has walked away with the odd card in his hand this pleasant, bright August morning.

CHAPTER THIRD.

"I WONDER if there is anywhere in the world a bit more charming than this Lenox landscape!" Louise Peale draws the rein over Brownie, and raises her whip-handle in the direction in which she is looking.

"Ah, I don't know," Nina Winthrop answers. "It is all lovely hereabouts to me, because I grew up spending my summers among our hills; but perhaps even I have learned to yearn more over the 'far, fair, foreign lands.'"

"You don't care much—very much, I mean—for America, do you, Nina?"

"Not too much," the girl answers, laughing. "I wouldn't be called an anglicized American for anything, but—"

"Well, 'but'—?" Louise laughs too.

"Well, I did not rave over my own country before I went abroad, and I did not begin to rave over it when I came back to it."

"Your country or—your countrymen, which?" Louise asks, raising her large dark eyes to Nina's face merrily.

"Both. I can dare to say to you, dear, what I would not, for instance, to our dear Mrs. Rose."

"I hope so." Louise's lip curls unconsciously.

"Oh, Lou, I like it over there; no one is in a hurry, and the places are old, and the men have time, and the women are gentle—and—"

"My dear child, what stupid, commonplace reasons for a bright woman like you to give. There is something else."

"Of course there is," Nina says impatiently, touching Flake uneasily with her crop.

"It is—?"

"Caste."

"Nina!"

"Yes, I mean it. We all worship it tacitly. Why should I not shout my allegiance from—not the housetop, but the saddle?"

"My dear child!"

"Yes, we do: we Americans. We adore it; and inch by inch we are building up for ourselves—our descendants then—the structure of as absolute an aristocracy as any that obtains to-day anywhere."

"Perhaps we are," the other assents slowly. "But aren't we all equal?" Louise raises her eyes to the arching azure above.

"Of course we are. But," Nina says, the rich color mounting to her round cheeks and kindling the blue in her large gray eyes—"but, Lou, we are not equal for each other. Oh, give me the courtesy that disdains effort—that horrible racking effort that all of us Americans, or almost all of us, are constantly making to take a higher step—to push ourselves into the next circle, the better set! Never content with the grade in which we were born, never dying in the rank or file from which we sprang!"

"And would you banish progress?"

"No. But I believe I would put a limit to social advancement."

"How?"

"By the recognition of caste."

"But you say we do recognize it."

"Yes; meanly, contemptibly. I would have it open, frank—legal."

"One meets vulgarians everywhere, my dear; abroad in society as well as here."

"True! But there they are the froth; here they are the foundation. There they are the tolerated exceptions; with us they are the solid structure. Our well-bred people are only flying buttresses and infrequent pinnacles, so that a gentleman with us is positively cited and known for nothing but his breeding."

"But our women?"

"They are divine. If I were a man—which, thank a kind fate, I am not—and not an American woman myself, I should fall in love with—several of them!"

"Nina!"

"I should. Delicious enigmas, reckless up to the point where it is necessary to be otherwise; suggestive of every possibility, and innocent-eyed as doves; capricious as the winds, and con-

stant where it is least expected; self-conscious and self-poised, daring, perverse, regal, lavish, overwhelming, fragile, nervous, incomprehensible riddles! How glad I am that I am one of them!" Nina Winthrop throws her crop in the air and catches it with the familiar dexterity of a boy.

"Nina, you are a puzzle to me."

"Nonsense, dear!—a puzzle, then, to which you surely hold the key."

"How—the key?"

"Of course," the girl laughs; "you are an American woman yourself."

"Oh, I see."

They both laugh as they canter along. Nina turns her head, for Louise follows.

"Who is that creeping up the hill?" she calls out gayly.

"Isn't it Mr. Redlon?"

"I think so—yes."

"Yes, it is. Coming for his every-other-day rehearsal duet, I suppose."

"Very likely. We are getting on tremendously well."

"Glad to hear it. By the way, Lou, we—that is, I—have promised to call upon those friends of Mrs. Rose's at Curtis's."

"The Drummond-Pecks?"

"Yes."

"Who are they; do you know?"

"Oh, no; of course I don't know. Does anybody know who anybody is?—that is, anybody that is new? They have no end of money, and—Mrs. Rose vouches for them; *voilà tout!*"

"Somebody said something or other about their being relatives of Lord Drummond's of Knock-Erran."

Nina glances at her companion with a little quizzical smile.

"My dear," she says merrily, "I have seen the Misses Drummond-Peck—from afar, it is true; I have likewise beheld the well-rounded form of Mrs. Drummond-Peck clad in garments of unexampled fashion and richness; and I will venture to say that none of the trio ever met Drummond of Knock-Erran in their lives, or is in any way related to him."

"Very likely not. Will you mind, dear, if I go on? I fear

Mr. Redlon has taken the wood-path and may be waiting for me."

Nina touches her cap and smiles.

Louise puts whip to Brownie, and in five minutes has dismounted at Winhurst.

The place is beautiful ; how well its mistress loves it, no one save the girl herself knows.

Nina, passionate, highly-strung, deep-natured, intense, yet has the light laughing lip of a mocker, and to translate her best into words would be to her spirit a profanation and an impossibility.

She stops her horse suddenly, and shading her eyes with her hand, looks over the land that lies before her.

Away to the south, where she knows sleepy Sheffield nestles in the valley, the Dome lies dark and filmy against the sky ; to the north Greylock stands boldly out, defined and sharp ; yonder the Stockbridge hills fall lovingly into each other's slopes ; between all stretch the peaceful farm lands and the woody ridges and little vales and glens ; and like a fine jewel in its beautiful setting, the lake gleams and glints in the sunshine.

The Winhurst lands which Nina Winthrop inherited ten years ago from her father—her mother died in her infancy—meet the water, although the house is half a mile away.

For the first time in her life a strange thrill creeps through her soul and brain. For the first time, with a curious reverence, the girl lifts her cap with a little glad laugh and thanks God that a piece of His earth belongs to her.

And as she rides slowly homeward under the arching elms whose shadow makes it damp and cool always there, where the brook threads its tinkling way in and out, and over and under, the long marsh grasses, and the flags, and the lobelias, and the big swamp-willow's drooping plumes, Nina Winthrop, still with that happy thank-God smile on her sweet lips, remembers without knowing it—self-conscious woman though she is—one of the men who love her.

Has he ever told her ? No. But yet—but yet—

When she thought so joyously of her home, her lands, she thought, too, of Jack Van Cortland.

And then—a canter in the sunlight, a dash up the avenue,

and Miss Winthrop was dismounting alone under the carriage-porch, without waiting for Poole, the groom, to come up.

A wide square piazza had been built at this end of the house, with a striped awning to keep off the sun on warm days, and the wind when it was cooler. A big Persian rug in soft harmonious colorings nearly covered the floor: a round table, littered with books and newspapers, magazines, fancy-work, and pens and ink-stands, stood in the centre; and grouped about it were all manner of comfortable chairs in cane and rattan, with a gay silken cushion here and there for the support of a tired back, and two or three hassocks for weary feet.

Winhurst had been built in the days before Queen Anne's second and purely architectural reign; consequently the main house of dull gray stone, half covered on its southern wall by a close-creeping mat of German ivy, presented none of that beguiling effect of deep slant of roof and pigeon-hole windows without, and correspondingly none of those impracticable, dark, shadowy, hot apartments within. The rooms were large and high and square, with wide windows full of light and air, and wide chimneys and fire-places, full of warmth in the cool mornings and evenings, full of green boughs when the mercury rose up near the eighties.

What made the picturesqueness of Winhurst was the additions which from time to time the late Mr. Winthrop had capriciously built on: a long, rambling, one-storied, quaintly-gabled and oriel-windowed gallery, comprising a billiard-room, an arched music-room done in all kinds of native woods and finished rather gaudily in blue plush and silver, and a pretty little breakfast-room, with balconies and a richly carved oak screen, which had a sliding panel, giving directly upon the next whim in the brick and mortar line which had assailed his fancy.

This was an octagon ball-room, fitted wholly in white woods and gilt, with mirrors everywhere, and great gilded candle-branches between. The ball-room had a second story, consisting of a pretty suite of three fair-sized rooms, a bed-chamber, dressing-room, and boudoir, and was connected with the main house by a quaint conceit of a thatch-covered, railed, and shingled gallery which ran across the roof of the billiard and music rooms,

and was reached by a tiny flight of brick steps beside the chimneys at either end.

This suite of rooms Nina had chosen for Louise, and with her own hands she had filled the vases and bowls with the choicest flowers in the gardens on the day, a fortnight since, when her friend was to arrive.

The view from the bow-windows was beautiful : a glint of the lake, great stretches of woodlands, a bit of smooth lawn, and—beyond the wide sweep of daisied meadows, where the sheep nibbled so industriously all day long, making a network of narrow tracks hither and thither, and near and far—a strip of low-lying sandy beach, a clump of sad swamp-willows, turning always shivering silvery leaves from the wind, and a piece of damp road, leading past the lake, on the way from Lenox to Stockbridge.

It was odd, but Louise Peale, whenever she looked out at that bit of pebbly, weedy beach-road, always sighed, and turned away, shuddering, and presently, with quick fingers, drew the curtains across the pane.

If the view was beautiful from these upper windows, it was none the less so from the library below, at the other end and in the main house ; for here the flower-gardens lay, and terraces bright with blooms, and trellises curtained well with flowering vines, and urns full of heliotrope, and banks of wonderful-hued asters, and great squares and moons and other geometrical designs in begonias, dear to the soul of McPherson, the Scotch gardener. Beyond the circles of the pine and tamarack trees, a narrow belt of which shut in this piece of velvety lawn, one saw only the wide sky and the point of the Dome pricking the blue, when the air was clear and fine, as it was to-day.

“ Nina ! Nina ! ”

“ Yes. ”

“ Well ! ” Mrs. Odlorne sinks apparently much exhausted into a large leather easy-chair. “ I must say I am glad you have gotten back. ”

“ Why ? Is anything the matter, Aunt Druse ? ” Nina draws off her gloves and tosses her cap on a table.

“ Oh, nothing special ; only the usual thing. ” Mrs. Odlorne sighs with a martyr-like and long-suffering smile.

"What?"

"Oh, the dogs, of course!" with a sincere and one might almost say anathematizing emphasis.

"Oh!" Nina laughs and runs to the half-open door. "Here! Jasper, Cockatoo, Periwinkle, Spot!" she calls merrily; and in a moment the four are capering about her joyously—the big black Newfoundland, the collie, the Skye, and the pug.

"Now, young gentlemen, what have you been doing? Come, own up: chasing the chickens, biting the lambs' heels, or—"

"Neither the one nor the other this time. They have merely uprooted all those choice new plants on the new terrace; McPherson had gone to Pittsfield this morning, as you know, about some new lawn-mowers, and I discovered them hard at work!"

"Cockatoo scented a mole, I dare say. Down, Spot, down!" Nina laughs as the Skye stands erectly on his hind-paws, with a contrite expression of countenance, as if begging absolution for himself and friends.

"I rushed down at once—I was reading my morning devotions, in my own room—and flew after them."

"Too bad!" sympathetically.

"If you could have seen the way in which those four dogs doubled, and pranced, and curveted—and—mocked me, Nina Winthrop, each one with a precious root in his wretched mouth, you would certainly, certainly sell them all, or give them away, at once."

Mrs. Odiorne pauses merely to acquire fresh breath.

"I never, never, in all my life, saw such wanton destruction encouraged."

"Oh," the girl laughs amusedly, "the roots won't amount to much, Aunt Druse."

"The roots, my dear," severely, "are by no means all. I chasing; those four horrible four-footed rascals tearing and scrambling." Mrs. Odiorne's comfortable and well-laced form trembles with emotion. "Of course they ran into the house, and through the first open door they came to—the drawing-room! They fell upon that lovely cushion that I myself embroidered for your dear father—my sainted brother!—and simply tore it to bits."

"I have no doubt they imagined that you were playing with them."

"Playing with them!" echoes the plump little widow, scornfully. "Dogs should be kept in kennels—and, as to my complexion!"—she raises two bright brown eyes to the mirror opposite her—"I look precisely like a ripe tomato!"

"Oh no, dearie, you don't at all. I am awfully sorry about the cushion, indeed I am; and more sorry that you should have torn about so after the dogs. They shall be punished, all of them." And, with a becoming show of severity from their young mistress, the masters Jasper, Cockatoo, Periwinkle, and Spot are marshalled out of the apartment, and Poole is bidden to take them to the stables and keep them there for the remainder of the day.

"I am so sorry," Nina says, returning; "you should not do such things. What are a few roots—and even a sofa-pillow—to putting one's self in such a state?"

"Duty, my dear, duty," Mrs. Odlorne replies sternly. "It is not right to sit by and see valuable property wilfully destroyed. I am here as your only living female—or male—relative; your social guardian, your chaperone; your guide, your adviser. I must admit," Mrs. Odlorne adds, with a faint sigh of long-suffering endurance—"I must admit that, as to my advice or guidance, the position is quite a sinecure—quite."

"Oh, Aunt Druse!" Nina presses a little kiss on Mrs. Odlorne's blonde puffs and curls, and makes a caressing, protesting little moue—

"Let me go and get you a glass of iced lemonade, like a dear, shan't I?"

"Iced lemonade!" cries Nina's aunt in tones of consternation. "And where would my complexion be, I should like to know, if I drank iced lemonade in the state of fever heat in which I am at present!"

"I don't know," Nina falters lamely.

"It is quite bad enough as it is. That oatmeal paste that Prince Charming recommended so strongly has had a very evil effect upon my skin, whatever he may think of it." Mrs. Odlorne smooths one cheek with her finger meditatively.

"Had he ever tried it himself?" the niece inquires circumspectly.

"I am sure I don't know. He didn't say; he merely sent the directions how to prepare and use it, in his letter from Vienna."

"Oh!"

"I dare say he has, though! I believe Moray Stuart would use anything on earth that he thought even ran a chance of keeping his youth with him a single hour longer than it would naturally stay. I don't blame him a bit; so would I."

Nina laughs.

"I would, my dear. What is there like youth? Nothing. When that is gone from us, what remains? The empty husks of memories all too sweet; the dim illusions of never-to-be-forgotten joys!"

It may be inferred that Mrs. Odlorne was of a somewhat poetic and volatile temperament, combining therewith a practical and downright vein which made her quite a character in a minor way.

She had been the late Mr. Winthrop's younger sister; early married to a man much older than herself, and soon left a widow. Jolly, good-tempered, romantic, sentimental, and somewhat vain, Mistress Drusilla labored under a brace of pleasing self-delusions, namely, that at forty-three she looked not a day above thirty-two, and that every man was in a greater or less degree a trifle more than favorably impressed with her charms.

"True," Nina murmurs, as Mrs. Odlorne gazes at her, expectant of some response.

"Ah, my dear, when my youth is really a thing of the past"—Dame Drusilla here bridles pensively—"I shall indeed be a miserable woman. There are few, very few who understand my strange, sensitive nature; my yearning for affection; my need of congenial surroundings; the thrill that quickens my spirit when it encounters a soul that comprehends its inner and most sacred aspirations. There are not many among the giddy throng who can pause to recognize in the sad little widow"—Drusilla sighs deeply, having long since succeeded in persuading herself that her attitude toward the world as the relict of the late Peter Odlorne, Esq., was picturesque and appealing to a remarkable degree.

Nina sighs properly too. She is rather tired from her ride,

and it is a happy moment to seize upon wherein to gratify her aunt's propensity for a listener.

"—In the sad little widow one of those refined, shrinking beings ever searching for its mate."

"But surely, Aunt Druse, you have some friends who understand and appreciate you?"

"I was going to tell you, my dear. I feel that Moray Stuart—our own Prince Charming—does comprehend me, does pierce with the weapons of his bright intellectuality through the outer cuticle of frivolity and smiles which surrounds me, and that he sees, far, far beyond, the true, noble woman, shining like the beacon-star of a new hope."

"Yes!" gasps Nina, whose knowledge of Prince Charming fails to cause her to coincide with this view of his natural proclivities.

"Yes, my dear. I have had a letter from him this morning."

"Oh, by the way, I had forgotten the mail. Were there any letters for me, or for Louise?"

"Yes, there they are." Mrs. Odlorne waves a white hand toward the letter-tray, and proceeds.

"He says that he is delighted to accept our invitation, and that he will come to us just as soon as he has attended to some few business matters in town."

"He has arrived, then?"

"Oh, to be sure! I thought I told you; by the *City of Rome*; day before yesterday. Only think! The poor dear fellow has been gone now from his native land—let me see—nine years, isn't it?"

"I don't know, dearie; I believe so. You know we saw so much of Prince Charming abroad that I forget I only knew him at home when I was too young—to appreciate him." Miss Winthrop laughs as she cuts open her letters.

"Of course, of course, my dear." Mrs. Odlorne smothers any reminiscence which forces upon her reluctant mind the unsavory fact that her niece, or no matter what other woman, can be younger than she is herself.

"Prince Charming is coming, then?"

"To be sure. He will telegraph or write me."

"I am glad that he does not disappoint us. To have a friend

fresh from the old country is so nice; it brings a breath of quiet things and pleasant things always with the visit. Besides, I am anxious for Moray and Louise to meet."

"Ah, my dear, they would never fancy each other—never," Mrs. Odlorne says decisively. "At least, he would never like her."

"Why not? I think he would specially like and admire her; in fact, I have quite set my heart on it."

"Not his style at all, my dear Nina."

"How?" the girl says, lifting puzzled large eyes to her aunt's contentious countenance.

Mrs. Odlorne raises her hands in the air, and shrugs her plump shoulders as she utters with a dismissing, conclusive air the cabalistic words:

"The stage."

"Oh, I see." Nina smiles. "I think you do the Prince an injustice. I never knew a more thoroughly artistic man in my life. He adores art, all art, for art's sake; and therefore I have thought of him as just the man to value and appreciate Louise Peale."

"My dear child, you are mistaken. Moray Stuart will be courteous to your guest, just as I am; but believe me, he will not sympathize with an actress"—Mrs. Odlorne utters this common noun with an unmistakable emphasis—"any more than I do."

"You don't like Louise, Aunt Druse, do you?" Nina asks, tapping her boot-tip with her whip.

"My dear, yes; I like her, of course; but I am grieved that from among all your school-friends the only one you see fit to have anything really to do with, is this young lady, who is about to make the stage her profession."

"Well, auntie!" Nina makes a little motion of regret and "can't help it" combined, as she cuts open a second letter.

"It seems strange to me, strange and unnatural," Mrs. Odlorne continues, waxing warm with the subject. "Here is this girl, years older than you are; you have had a childish penchant for her at school; you separate; for five years you neither see nor hear anything of her whatever; then, forsooth, you accidentally behold her acting in amateur theatricals for some charity

or other; you rush around behind the scenes, dragging me with you, and from that day to this I hear nothing else but Louise Peale from one week's end to another!"

"I like her," Miss Winthrop says shortly.

"And now," continues Mrs. Odlorne, "I presume that this season, as she makes her first appearance in October—I presume, I say, that Winhurst will be a sort of theatrical inn. It seems to be quite turned into a place of rehearsals as it is, and—"

CHAPTER FOURTH.

MRS. ODLORNE'S further peroration is cut sharply short by the entrance of the subject of her remarks, accompanied by Mr. Redlon.

"Rehearsal is over!" Louise cries laughingly, coming in. "Oh, are there any letters for me?"

"Only one," giving it.

"Oh! from Mr. Forman. Pardon me."

"I told you 'Good-morning,' Mrs. Odlorne, an hour ago, but you were too actively in pursuit of your dogs to pay the least attention to me," Jerriss says, bowing over the widow's hand, and smiling his greeting over at Nina.

"Ah, Mr. Redlon, no one knows what chaperoning a niece—"

"With dogs," interpolates Nina.

"—Is!"

"What is the news from Forman, Miss Peale, may I ask?"

"Read for yourself, Mr. Redlon, and aloud for Miss Winthrop and Mrs. Odlorne," Miss Peale adds courteously.

"Not for me, my dear; I have orders to give, a cook to scold, and a housemaid to admonish—until luncheon-time!" And Mistress Drusilla, armed with the wreck of the sofa-pillow, sidles out of the room.

The trio, with a common movement and impulse, draw a bit nearer to each other, leaning on the big square table; while Jerriss adjusts his glasses and unfolds Forman's letter.

"THE CRITERION,
"Tuesday.

"MY DEAR MISS PEALE:

"Our scenic artists are very busy over the first set for *The Brazilian*; Mr. Bartram desires very much that Mr. Redlon shall rewrite the third act, so that we can do with four sets for the piece, instead of the five now required; we have never had more than three for any play so far, and Mr. Bartram fears that it would overrun our entr'acte time to attempt this complicated third-act affair as it stands. Of course all this will necessitate something of a change in your part. I have business in Springfield on Thursday, and, with your permission, will drop in upon you for a few hours on Friday A.M. I believe Mr. Redlon is in Lenox; hope to see him also, and settle the matter satisfactorily.

"Yours truly,

"DAVID FORMAN."

Jerriss laughs with a frown of comic despair as he returns the epistle to its recipient.

"You see, Miss Peale, it is as I told you. A play is never finished until it has not only been produced, but played for several weeks!"

"I thought everything was settled," groaned Louise.

"Why couldn't Bartram have found all this out before now?" asks Nina.

"Inscrutable mystery," laughs the playwright.

"Are you going to do it?" inquires Louise.

"Am I going to do it?" echoes Jerriss. "Oh yes; why not?" resignedly. "I altered the fifth act to please you; I cut out two scenes from the third to give satisfaction to Forman; I wrote in an entire new scene in deference to the wishes of Trelawney; I expunged five speeches distasteful to the feelings of Mrs. Farnham—our 'old woman,'" he explains, turning to Nina; "I lengthened the second act to meet the ambition of the soubrette; I curtailed the ball-room episode to accord with the ideas of the villain; I invented a novel point to calm the excited mind of the 'old man;' and now, what more natural than that I should rewrite the third act to suit the stage-manager? Nothing."

Both the girls laugh heartily at Jerriss's catalogue of the amiabilities of his disposition.

"Probably by the next post we shall hear that the gas-man and the prompter have put in their plea for consideration"—mirthfully.

"Oh, Mr. Redlon! But really, can't it all be settled when Mr. Forman comes?"

"Certainly, Miss Peale."

"And without spoiling *Dolores*?"

"Undoubtedly."

"I must telegraph Mr. Forman to-day," Louise adds thoughtfully.

"Be so good, Lou, as to say that Mrs. Odlorne and Miss Winthrop desire him to come straight to Winhurst. I dare say his time is valuable, and he had much better waste none of it in stopping at Curtis's, and all that."

Louise takes Nina's hand in hers, and bestows a little quick kiss upon it, looking up with gratified luminous eyes in her friend's face.

"Thank you, dear," she says simply; "I will."

"Of course you have never met Forman?" Jerriss asks Nina.

"No; I have only heard of him from Louise."

"He is a capital fellow; he and I, you know, were both together on *The Standard*, John Russell Young's paper, years ago."

"Indeed!" Louise says, "were you?"

"Then Mr. Forman began as a journalist?" Nina exclaims interestedly.

"Yes; and there is not an availability, so to speak, of which journalism is capable that he is not acquainted with. There is nothing of the usual noticeable something, inseparable from the theatrical manager, about Dave Forman: quiet, courteous, quick, business-like; a thin, slight figure, a pale, sallow, almost boyish face, save for the calm appraising eyes and thinning hair. Should you see him sitting in his own parquette in evening dress, his crush-hat in his hand, you would remark him as a student and a gentleman."

"He is thoroughly so!" Louise exclaims warmly. "How

thoughtfully he has helped me over the rough places in my professional prologue, no one knows!"

"And from behind those glasses of his there is nothing that escapes him. I consider Dave Forman a genius—I do. He is constantly inventing, originating, some little—or great—detail to insure the comfort of his patrons and the consequent éclat of his house."

"He really made the *Temple* what it eventually became, did he not?"

"He was the man, Miss Winthrop,—and a very young one, in those days,—to have made New York fall in love with a thing it had no real predisposition to favor!"

"The *Criterion* is such a bijou!" Nina cries; "and I am so glad, Louise, that you are to make your débüt at such a theatre, with such a manager!"

"And such an author!" Louise says, looking at Jerriss with wide, kindly eyes.

"That goes without saying, Miss!" Nina exclaims swiftly. "I am just as much interested in his success as yours, and success I know it will be!"

"If the play is ever completed," Jerriss murmurs comically, taking up Forman's note again.

"He will be here Friday morning, he says, does he not?" Nina turns to Louise.

"Yes, dear, Friday morning."

"I must give Poole orders to send down a trap for the first up-train, and to have it wait until Mr. Forman arrives."

"I shall go to the station to meet him, Miss Winthrop," says Jerriss.

"*Tant mieux*. You can drive up together, then. I may go down myself, for we are expecting other guests, and I fancy, on that day."

"Who comes, Nina?" Louise asks.

"Oh!"—with a pretty little moue, laying her finger on her lips—"somebody!—Prince Charming is coming, my dear, and I know—I am positive—that you and he are going to be great friends."

"Yes? To be sure; I remember you and Mrs. Odlorne have told me how fascinating and delightful he is!"

"Who is he?" queries the journalist.

"Ah, Mr. Redlon, they haven't even told me his name yet; all I have heard is 'Prince Charming.'"

"No, I shan't tell you his name. I want you to meet him first, and then see if you don't say he should never be called anything else."

"Are you expecting any other guests this week, Nina?"

"Ye-s," Miss Winthrop returns, with a trifle of hesitation, due, perhaps, to the fact that Mrs. Odlorne at this moment rejoins them, provided with some light and elegant fancy-work. "To be sure. By the way, auntie, I quite forgot to mention—Mr. Van Cortland tells me, in his letter this morning, that he will be here on Friday night."

"Is Jack really coming?" Louise asks, looking into her friend's shy, down-drooping eyes.

"Yes, oh yes," Mrs. Odlorne replies cheerfully. "Mr. Van Cortland was asked long ago. Will he bring his horses, Nina? I hope so, and that lovely drag. He insists upon it that I shall sit with him on the box-seat the very first drive."

"Yes; he says that his men will come on before him, and that he has got very good stabling somewhere quite near town."

"How fortunate! And Prince Charming, dear boy!" Mrs. Odlorne sighs, as she sorts her silks. "He too will be with us before the close of the week. It seems to me I can scarcely wait for the moment to arrive when I can exchange ideas with a being who truly comprehends my mournful and erratic nature!" The little widow sighs plaintively; she is neither mournful nor erratic; but the rôle pleases her imagination, and she thinks herself both.

"'Prince Charming,' as you call him, appears to be the ladies' favorite, Mrs. Odlorne. Miss Nina, here, has just been ringing his praises for Miss Peale's benefit and mine; and now you—"

"Ah!" Mrs. Odlorne smiles, with lowered lids. "Yes; Prince Charming is perhaps rather more my friend than dear Nina's."

Nina's dark brows elevate themselves somewhat interrogatively.

"He finds in me more congeniality, I presume."

"I am prepared to adore him!" Louise laughs,

"Um!" The widow smiles again with supercilious sweetness. "I fear you won't specially fancy him, Miss Peale."

"Oh yes, she shall!" cries Nina.

"May be!" Mrs. Odlorne allows, with a shrug.

"What is he like, this coming paragon?" Mr. Redlon makes inquiry with genuine interest; his eyes, meantime, gazing with a swift, unconscious tenderness at the young woman who is to be his leading lady.

"Like—like? I don't know, I am sure, what he is like," Nina responds dreamily. "Auntie, dear, what is Prince Charming like? Mr. Redlon wishes to know."

"He is utterly unlike any other man I ever met," the plump little widow ejaculates warmly.

"I think he is a very pure-minded man," Miss Winthrop says, still with that far-away expression on her face.

"Yes, I suppose he is," her aunt says, with a fund of doubt somewhere in her tone.

"Why, don't you think he is, auntie?"

"I say I presume so, my dear. I, for my part, have not much affinity, I must confess, with a goody-goody man."

"Oh!" Nina laughs heartily. "I don't think any one, in their wildest moments, would think of calling Prince Charming that."

"No, I must say," continues Mrs. Odlorne, pursuing the tenor of her own interrupted inclinations, "I must say I like a man who has seen the world and knows its—its—"

"Temptations," Mr. Redlon obligingly concludes.

"Exactly. Give me a being who demands my pardon and—"

"Not just the most difficult being in the world to find, Mrs. Odlorne," Jerriss smiles as he glances up.

"Perhaps not; but my nature craves to bend in pity and forgiveness over the shortcomings of its fellow-man." It is as well to remark, *en passant*, that Mrs. Odlorne regards every masculine being with whom Providence throws her in contact as a possible, if not probable, alter ego.

"How strange!" exclaims Louise.

"Do you mean, Aunt Druse," Nina asks, with cheeks half-flushing at her thoughts, "that you would prefer a man who had—well, say, made some other woman wretched—cheated, deceived, perhaps scorned her?"

Louise's beautiful dark eyes seek Nina's face in a mute but almost appealing interest.

"I fear I do, my dear!" Mistress Drusilla's laugh is jolly, unctuous, full of good-nature and a genuine sympathy with her own partialities.

Jerriss laughs too.

Louise looks intently at Nina, whose color rises rosy red as she speaks.

"And I—oh," she cries, "how different people are!—I would hold it my bounden duty to mete out to such a man misery for misery, deceit for deceit, scorn for scorn: as he had dealt, so should he receive."

"Nina!" Mrs. Odlorne utters her young relative's name in a tone of mild and well-bred horror.

"Did you never meet such a man, Nina?" Louise asks in a low voice.

"Never, to be sure of it. They blame me," the girl cries excitedly, "because I have broken four or five engagements to marry. I would break twenty sooner than become the wife of a man I could not love and respect."

"Shouldn't one be able to find that out before one becomes engaged, Miss Winthrop?"

"They must be cleverer than I if they can. They say I have broken men's hearts, and ruined their lives. Do you know, Mr. Redlon, I have always had a vague, odd idea of justice about it all. I have always fancied that—granting their hearts were broken—so some woman whose life had been wrecked was avenged."

"The innocent, then, have suffered for the guilty," Jerriss says.

"Do not they always?"

"Very often," he replies.

"Nina Winthrop,"—Mrs. Odlorne finally musters sufficient breath to speak,—"*do you mean to say that—well, what do you mean to say?*"

"About what, Aunt Druse?"

"Well—" Mrs. Odlorne hesitates a bit. "Suppose, for instance, that Prince Charming had—well—"

"What?" Nina asks, puzzled.

"I think Mrs. Odlorne intends to say this, Miss Winthrop:

suppose, for example, that your immaculate friend, our as yet unseen Prince, should have, somewhere in the dim past, played with and thrown over some true woman's heart; would you—what would you do?"

Louise's eyes are fastened almost hungrily upon Nina's face.

"Thank you, Mr. Redlon," Mrs. Odlorne murmurs as Nina speaks.

"I should allow Prince Charming to fall in love with me, and lead him through a very pleasant two months, and then—"

"Then what?" Louisa says eagerly.

"Throw him over in the face of the world."

"You constitute yourself, then, a sort of domestic missionary?" the widow inquires ironically.

"An avenging angel!" Jerriss amends.

"I don't know what I am," the girl says hastily. "But I do know that the mere idea of a man's cruelty to a woman rouses a kind of retaliatory spirit in me that I cannot crush."

"And how about woman's cruelty to man?" Mr. Redlon puts in naively.

"Oh, *ça va sans dire*!" Nina laughs lightly.

"That is a part of—the woman, is it not, Mr. Redlon?" Miss Peale says.

"I suppose so—a part that, I dare say, you ladies," Jerriss waves a diplomatically inclusive hand in the direction of Mrs. Odlorne, "will be playing with admirable ease in a few brief days."

"How so?" inquires Drusilla.

"Oh, are not Mr. Van Cortland and Prince Charming coming?—not to mention my unworthy self, already in the toils!"

"And Mr. Forman," puts in Nina, mischievously regarding her aunt.

"Mr. who, my dear?"

"Forman; the manager of the *Criterion*, you know, auntie dear. I have sent word for him to come directly to Winhurst. He is coming to see Miss Peale and Mr. Redlon on business."

"Oh!" Mrs. Odlorne's lids fall over her orbs with a martyred expression of meekness, as she mentally hails this announcement as the first verification of her prophecy of an hour ago,

"Is Mr. Forman married, by the bye, Lou?"

"No."

"How delightful!" Nina glances at her relative's pursed-up lips. "Only think of it! four unmarried men in the house at once!"

"And when one of them is a 'Prince Charming'!" Jerriss cries.

"Indeed he is!" exclaims the widow. "Charming in every way; well-born—"

"Take care, Aunt Druse," interrupts Miss Nina; "family, you remember, is really not a strong point with the Prince. His grandfather was a stone-cutter!"

"Is that so?" Jerriss says, mimicking Miss Drummond-Peck quite successfully.

"Well-bred," continues Mrs. Odlorne, placidly, "travelled, cultured, sympathetic, intellectual, tender as a woman, strong and helpful as a man should be, full of suavity for all."

"Truly," the niece indorses, "I don't believe the Prince would permit any human being, man, woman, or child, black or white, to pass by him without at least putting forth one effort to—"

"Please them!" finishes Mrs. Odlorne.

"Not precisely. Make them pleased with themselves is what I was going to say, auntie."

"Oh!"

"Really, Lou," Nina says, turning toward Miss Peale, "he is, jests aside, a remarkable man; a strange man, too. I think he is in love—"

Mistress Drusilla starts nervously, keeping her needle poised in mid-air as she awaits the conclusion of this statement.

"—With life; his own individual life. I think he regards the power to breathe, to do, to think, to enjoy, which we call life, as it comes to him, as the most wonderful, and beautiful, and reverent thing on earth!"

"And how about 'to suffer'?" Louise asks; "or does not the construing of that verb enter into your Prince's calculations?"

"'To suffer,'" Nina repeats vaguely. "I wonder if he could suffer. I don't know, but I doubt if he ever has. He is one of those men, Louise, whom you always associate in your mind with happy, prosperous things. You imagine him always stand-

ing in the sunshine, and always with flowers near him. There is, it always seems to me,—I don't know why,—a kind of halo of freshness and goodness of living and cleanliness about him. I like him."

"Evidently," Jerriss says.

"I mean it," the girl says simply. "I just like him—that is all, would always be all."

"Nina," Mrs. Odlorne remarks briskly, after this disquisition of her niece's, "I think I shall go down and call upon Mrs. Rose and those friends of hers this afternoon. Do you and Miss Peale feel like going too?"

"Yes, of course I will go. Lou, what do you say, dear?"

"I believe I'll not venture, if you will excuse me. I will send cards; for you know, Nina, I am not quite a favorite with our dear Mrs. Rose."

"I know it," the other says bluntly; "and why is it?"

"I suppose it is because I never expressed any wild admiration for her readings, did not hasten to place myself under her protecting wing, and failed altogether to appreciate her power to put me favorably in print."

"Mrs. Rose is a person whose influence is not to be despised, my dear," Mrs. Odlorne remarks, with an air of deep inward conviction.

"By no means," Jerriss murmurs.

"You should do all you can—shouldn't you, Lou?—to conciliate all these dreadful people of the press," Nina cries gayly, glancing at Mr. Redlon.

"She should indeed. Being one of the just-mentioned terrors, I am competent to speak."

"I dare say I ought. I have—but Mrs. Rose—well, to be frank, she fawned upon me so—in fact, the truth of the whole affair is this: Mrs. Rose offered her services to me in a very diplomatic fashion as chaperone. An actress is supposed to need that useful adjunct, and madame rather thought she should fancy the position, the travelling about, the good salary, and the best hotels—"

"Is it possible?" interrupts the widow.

"I declined the honor. I thought that Gerton would answer the double purpose of dresser and duenna. She is very discreet

and severe—not that I am liable to require either her discretion or her severity. However, Mrs. Rose has never forgiven me for declining her proposition.”

“And is that it?” cries Nina, relieved.

“That is all. But I have no doubt she will write me down after my *début* quite as much as she wrote me up before she made her proposal,” Louise laughs.

“Oh, I trust not!” Mrs. Odlorne exclaims sympathetically.

“So much the better,” Jerriss remarks. “All the others will endorse you. A little healthy animosity will be just the thing; it always awakens the more interest.”

“Oh, worldly-wise!” Nina shakes her head at him. “Well,” she says, rising, “I must go and get out of my habit into a decent gown for luncheon. Oh, auntie!” following Mrs. Odlorne’s retreating form. “By the way, Mr. Redlon, of course you will stop for luncheon—*au revoir*.”

“With pleasure. *Au revoir*.”

As the portière swings to after Nina has left the room, Louise, taking up a pen from the tray, says to Jerriss, standing near her with his hand leaning lightly on the back of her chair, “Will you do something for me, Mr. Redlon?”

“Is there anything that I will not do for you?” he makes answer, in a low, restrained voice.

She looks up at him—a comprehending, sweet, but unresponsive glance. “It is only to send this telegram off to Forman.”

“With pleasure. Is there nothing else?”

“Nothing,” decisively.

“Why,” he says, bending his flushed face lower over the back of her chair—“why is it that whenever I dare to get off, never so slightly, from our beaten track of poses and rôles, and all the rubbish of these daily rehearsals, your voice takes on a tone as if—as if—” He hesitates.

“As if—?”

“There was some strange barrier to our—friendship—ever progressing beyond the vapid stage of star and author.”

“Oh!” she laughs—the pretty, mocking, light foollight laugh that Bartram affirms would fetch any audience in two seconds. “How absurd!”

"I think so!" he cries earnestly.

"What an idea!" Another peal of that sweet, flute-like mirth. "Are we not already the best of friends?"

"I don't know," quietly.

"You don't know?" She turns her lovely head aside so that the sunlight falls upon the soft short rings of her yellow hair, upon the delicate outline of her cameo-like face, upon the silhouette of her slight lissome figure in the long clinging pale pink gown—the wide sleeve has fallen back from the arm which leans upon the table.

"You don't know!" she repeats reproachfully.

"Well, I do know, then; perhaps the negative is rather nearer to the truth."

"Ah, that is better, Mr. Redlon," she says seriously. "After Miss Winthrop, I look upon you as the best friend that I have in the world. And should I not? Through your influence, by your wish, Forman entrusts me with the rôle of *Dolores*—you trust me with it; me, a novice—a mere amateur!"

"With a reputation that has travelled across the sea," he smiles. "Perhaps Forman and I have not been quite so benevolent after all."

"Yes, you have. Of course I shall succeed: a stick could not fail with such a part; it plays itself."

"Not quite."

"Oh, but it does. And you are sure that this new alteration will not hurt the rôle?"

"Not at all. If I should find that it did, I should refuse to make it—that is all."

"Do what you like; only don't spoil my *Dolores*."

Jerriss Redlon laughs softly to himself.

"It is hardly likely that I should. Why," he cries impetuously, laying his cheek for an instant on the bared white arm so dangerously near him, "you inspired me to write it. In you I saw *Dolores*; you are responsible for whatever there is of good about the whole thing. My life! my love!" And, strangely, —for Jerriss Redlon is no weak man, but rather one of a strong character and fixed purposes,—a sob escapes him, and two tears force their way from his eyes.

"Hush-h!" Louise Peale turns deadly pale—quite as pale as

she did the first time she looked out of one of the windows of her room upstairs, and saw the long strip of pebbly beach, yonder, lying in the swamp-willows' shade.

The man raises his head and looks at her.

"Tell me," he cries—"put an end to this haunting feeling that I always have when I venture to think of you—is there anything between us? Do you—dislike me?"

"No," quickly.

"Am I—I am a tremendously ugly fellow, of course—but am I repulsively so to you, for instance?"

"No-o." Her voice quivers.

"Then—Louise—" He utters her name caressingly, looking into her face with eager searching glances.

"No, no, no, no!" She rises and steps away from his seeking hands. "You see—I mean—" smiling bravely as she whispers—"there is—ah! Mr. Redlon!" And then there comes again the pretty ringing laugh that shall sound so perilously sweet over the flare of the footlights a month or two hence at the *Criterion*.

"Don't!" he cries wildly, "don't laugh at me like that!"

"Laugh at you! Oh, I am not laughing at you." There is a tenderness that is piercing in its intensity in her tone. "I am laughing at myself, Mr. Redlon—at myself. Come," she adds, putting out both her white hands, "believe me, I am not worthy of—aught that a man like you would waste upon me. I am devoted to, absorbed in, my art; for it I live, and move, and have my being. Believe in my friendship; believe me when I tell you that the sweeter half of my triumph in *The Brazilian* will be the share that will be yours."

He stands still; he does not even attempt to take the outstretched hands. He touches his brow unsteadily.

"Come," she repeats, hearing footsteps in the hall, "'uncheon is ready, I am sure. I am desperately hungry, aren't you?"

"Oh yes," he answers simply, as Mrs. Odlorne parts the curtains and bids them to the feast.

CHAPTER FIFTH.

MR. FORMAN came to Lenox on Thursday, arriving at Winhurst at eleven o'clock in the morning. He then and there held a long conclave with his author and his star, monopolizing for the nonce the library, rather than Miss Peale's tiny boudoir above.

Mrs. Odlorne received him with a preface of becoming frigidity, which speedily thawed into a summer-like warmth and hospitality as she inwardly noted the manager's quiet dignity and perfectly well-bred manners at the luncheon-table.

Nina was delighted with him. His simplicity, directness, calm and even demeanor pleased her, and gave her all the more confidence in his judgment of Louise's capacities.

After luncheon there came another consultation over the play, prolonged until Poole put in an appearance at the porch with the trap that had been ordered to take Mr. Forman to the station in time for the 5.20 train.

"Isn't he nice?" exclaims Nina, as she bows her last adieu to a dissolving view of the manager's hat.

"Very," replies Mrs. Odlorne. "I really had no idea that such people were—well—at all presentable—in one's drawing-room, for instance."

"Don't be too enthusiastic, Mrs. Odlorne!" cries Mr. Redlon, "or too lavish of your encomiums. Be so good as to recall the fact that you have as yet only had an opportunity of observing Mr. Forman in the library and the dining-room. As to what he might prove in the salon—who knows?"

"Tease!" Nina exclaims. "For my part, if I can tolerate a man at the table, I always feel sure that I should adore him in the parlor."

"Dining is rather a book of revelations, often, isn't it?" Jerriss responds mischievously.

"Indeed it is," Louise says heartily. "The knife and fork are sad disenchanters very frequently."

"Prince Charming eats!" The plump widow raises palms and

orbs in ecstatic and pantomimic admiration of this gentleman's methods.

"The Prince does eat well," Nina observes.

"That is the fellow who does everything well, isn't it?" Mr. Redlon inquires.

"It is," Mrs. Odlorne murmurs, apparently still lost in a mental rhapsody on the subject.

"I wonder," Miss Winthrop says musingly, as she settles herself in a comfortable cane chair, rather than stand any longer on the square piazza—"I wonder, *par exemple*, how the Drummond-Pecks wield the weapons of the board."

"Nina Winthrop!" Mrs. Odlorne stops short in placing her feet on a hassock, and Jerriss's eyes twinkle through his glasses as he draws a seat nearer to the table for Miss Peale.

"Oh, by the way, Nina, how were you impressed when you called the other day?" Louise asks.

"I was impressed, my dear, to that extent that—"

"You were rendered speechless?"

"Is that so?" Mr. Jerriss Redlon is not a bad mimic. Nina laughs.

"Nearly. How Mrs. Rose can play social godmother to such a trio of rarities passes my comprehension."

"Money," Jerriss says succinctly.

"No!" cries the widow.

"Yes," responds Mr. Redlon.

"But aren't they cousins, or relatives of some sort, of Lord Drummond of Scotland?" Miss Peale asks innocently.

"Via Adam and Noah," Mr. Redlon allows seriously.

"And shall you really take them up, Nina?"

"Well, Lou, so far as I can see, they have been 'taken up' pretty thoroughly. Yes, I suppose I shall have to. People one is sure to meet everywhere, one might as well be civil to first as last."

"Yes, I dare say."

"They are intensely amusing. I had the best possible time leading Mrs. Drummond-Peck by a circuitous route through Italy and France up to Scotland and her supposed relative's castle."

"What did she do," inquires Louise—"that is, after her arrival?"

"Ah, she never arrived," quoth Jerriss.

"How do you know, sir?"

"Took her the identical trip myself. Mrs. Rose jumped off at the same station, my dear Miss Winthrop. I'll guarantee the word 'Knock-Erran' was no sooner enunciated by your beautiful lips than Madame Rose swooped down upon you and her eldest protégée, with all the superabundant and unfathomable blandness for which she is so celebrated."

They all laugh heartily.

"She either called your attention to the scenery, or the book in hand, or a passing steed, or—"

"It was the passing steed this time," Nina interrupts merrily.

"And *à propos*, my dear," turning to Miss Peale, "what do you suppose the younger one, Josephine, asked me?"

"Can't imagine."

"Where I got my gray habit made! Think of it—a first call!"

"What did the sponsor do at this crisis?" inquires Jerriss.

"Oh, nothing. Auntie had her; yes, she said, 'Poole, I expect;' and I replied, 'No, Delury;' and then, just as she was fairly launched in an interesting dissertation on the respective merits of Worth and Donovan, and Connolly and somebody else, Mrs. Rose—"

"Gracefully interpolated," finishes Jerriss.

"Precisely. Ah, Jane." Miss Winthrop turns aside as the maid comes out with letters and a telegram in her hand. "For me?" she asks.

"Yes, Miss Winthrop, the letters; the dispatch is for Mrs. Odlorne."

"From the Prince, no doubt," the little widow cries, nervously tearing open the yellow envelope.

"No!" a falling inflection. "From Mr. Van Cortland, Nina; he will not be here until Saturday."

"No?"

"Jack's a superb fellow," Jerriss says, looking off dimly.

"You like him?" Nina asks.

"Yes, I do; and I admire him intensely. There is a symmetry of development about him that is seldom encountered."

"How, Mr. Redlon?" Mrs. Odlorne asks interestedly, and with an evident mental eye to an appropriation of the term to her Prince at the first favorable opportunity.

"Oh, he's a splendid fellow. He rides, and drives, and rows, and fences, and boxes; and then, on the other hand, he plays wonderfully well on the organ."

"Do you know," Nina exclaims, "that phase of Mr. Van Cortland always strikes me as incongruous."

"Which—his musical talent?" inquires Louise.

Yes; I can't help associating a playing man with effeminacy, —and yet there is not a suspicion of womanishness about Jack Van Cortland."

"Hardly," Mr. Redlon vouchsafes, with a smile. "He is a capital scholar, rather of a linguist, a connoisseur in art and that—"

"And pretty women," interpolates the widow, bridling good-naturedly.

"Exactly; and wines and horses; well read; something of a politician."

"In theory," laughs Miss Winthrop.

Jerriss shrugs his shoulders.

"Our nation is not old enough, Miss Winthrop, to expect very many gentlemen to mix themselves up with the affairs of local government, or even with the state. He is *bon camarade* —thoroughly."

"*Bon vivant*—partly," Louise laughs, glancing up.

"A bit of it. But, as I say, he is rarely balanced; his physique has not been cultivated at the expense of his brain, nor *vice versa*."

"Very true!" remarks Mrs. Odlorne, with an emphasis which betokens that her spirit is newly returned from one of its habitual and romantic flights.

"I have always felt a peculiar sympathy for Mr. Van Cortland —always."

Accuracy persuades the recording of facts. The brisk little relict of the late Peter Odlorne had, up to ten minutes ago, thought nothing whatever about Mr. Jack Van Cortland; but Jerriss's estimate had, in a sense, inflamed her fancy, and forthwith she felt it incumbent upon herself to concoct an affinity

with him, as a sort of possible offset to the perchance doubtful, and certainly imaginative, intercourse which she held with her Prince Charming.

"Have you, auntie?" Nina inquires in tones of discreetly smothered mirth.

"I have, my dear. I feel that I am one of those unusual women—unusual, that is, for my years"—Drusilla again bridles—"who can perfectly appreciate a man of so uncommon a type. I can sympathize with all his moods, all his tastes and recreations—"

"Boxing, for example, Mrs. Odlorne?" Jerriss inquires blandly.

"Mr. Redlon!"

"Madame!"

"Mr. Redlon, be quiet!" Nina says, repressing natural laughter with difficulty.

Louise's head is bent low over her fancy-work; her dark, splendid eyes seldom meet Jerriss Redlon's these past two days.

"As I was remarking," pursues the widow with dignity, "I could enter into, if not actually join in," severely surveying the journalist, "all the pleasures and studies of such a man."

"Of course, auntie," murmurs her niece, dutifully.

"Ah me!" Mistress Drusilla sighs, as she folds her plump little hands over each other, and gazes sentimentally off to where the hazy round of Mount Everett melts into the blue—"Ah me! Peter was a good true man—a slave to me; my adorer up to the moment when the good Lord saw fit to remove him from my side"—a few presumable tears accompany this speech, for Mrs. Odlorne's handkerchief sweeps airily across her face: those delicately pink cheeks would hardly admit of a more intimate acquaintance with spotless cambric—"but"—her head waves back and forth in sad lament—"Peter did not, could not, appreciate me; my poor Peter! he dwelt upon the earth; whilst I—poor child!—I have always soared." A pause.

Louise endeavors to fill it with a sigh, long-drawn and deep.

Jerriss shakes his head mournfully in consonance with the theme, and Nina veils her face with the magazine she has taken up.

"I always shall soar."

"I believe you will, auntie; really I do!"

"Yes, my dear. And I sometimes feel that perhaps it is only bare justice to my own, as yet, unsatisfied nature, that I should give it that scope—which—" Another airy whiff of the square of lace and cambric.

The girls both venture to look up expectantly.

Jerriss's eyes are bent upon the floor; not a muscle of his face twitches as he traces patterns upon the rug with his cane, and as he speaks in a low, suppressed voice.

"That scope, Mrs. Odorne, which only a second marriage—with a man who could really comprehend and value you"—Jerriss utters the sentence in the voice of the expectant and hopeful and would-be successor of "poor Peter"—"can afford," he concludes, with that falling inflection ever grateful to the feminine ear, when proceeding from the masculine lip.

"Do you think—oh, Mr. Redlon—are you—I mean—" Drussilla's bright eyes, clear of tears, gaze wistfully into the journalist's downcast countenance.

"Would you really advise me—to—"

Mr. Redlon raises his lids; his glance falls full upon the flushed face of the little widow.

"I would," he murmurs, with a gaze as full of sentimentality as glasses will admit of.

Louise and Nina both sink into an ignominious slavery to needlework and light literature.

"But, pshaw!" shrugging his shoulders, and tapping his boot recklessly with his cane, "what is my advice to you?—nothing; worse than nothing!" Jerriss says this with the desperate air of a newly-refused suitor.

"Now, Mr. Redlon, don't say that! Please don't!"

"Is it not the truth?" he exclaims in a species of wrecked-for-life stage-whisper.

"Of course not. Indeed, Mr. Redlon, I value your counsel very, very much. I have always felt that there was a bond of peculiar sympathy and accord between us, which—circumstances alone were required to bring out."

"Really?" cries this arch-rascal, catching a side glance of exchange with Nina, and still preserving his solemnity of aspect,

as he perceives that the two girls are becoming totally demoralized.

"Truly!" murmurs Mrs. Odlorne. "Ask my niece. Nina dear, have I not frequently told you that I felt a strange congeniality to Mr. Redlon?"

"I—I forget, auntie dear."

"Why, Nina?"

"Bless my soul, ladies!" Jerriss springs up, watch in hand; "it is six o'clock; I must be off!"

"Do stop for dinner—please," the little widow pleads, as pleased with the discovery of a new kindred spirit as a child with a fresh toy.

"Thank you; I can't possibly. Miss Winthrop—Miss Louise." He bows to the two, and for an instant his hand holds Miss Peale's before he goes.

Jerriss loved her.

From the moment when he had sat at Nina Winthrop's side in Chickering Hall—having dropped in for a quarter of an hour, "just to see what this Miss Peale, the amateur, is like, you know, whom all New York is raving over"—he had been fascinated.

She was beautiful, with that odd charm of a certain patient pathos shining from her dark eyes; she was immensely clever, suggestive, bright, appreciative, and withal somewhat caustic and—strange combination—timid; shrinking from strangers like a shy child, and withdrawing more and more to herself as her fame and praise extended.

Redlon had been entirely in earnest when he had told her that she had been the inspiration for his new play. Like every other literary man, Jerriss had written half-a-dozen, all safely shelved, duly copyrighted, and securely pigeon-holed, after much voyaging to and fro among all the theatrical managers in the land. But this play had been promptly accepted, Forman making but one stipulation: that Miss Peale should make her *début* in it, he having just secured her, ahead of three other enterprising men who wanted "the new sensation" very badly.

What could be more exactly suited to his desire?

Surely nothing.

And it was an odd freak of destiny that Louise Peale was

to make her first professional appearance in a rôle which she herself had suggested, and, as it were, called into being.

By this means, for a year now, they had been thrown much together, and unconsciously Louise had grown to lean upon and look up to him. His feeling for her was by no means unconscious; painfully the reverse—for, as he had told her, there seemed to him to be some bar, always, to his getting beyond the friendly chat of author and player.

Why, he could not tell, half fancying that a new timidity had suddenly developed in himself, rather than the existence of any repellent in the woman whom he loved.

He had listened quietly to her half-incoherent protest of the other day when he had ventured, without premeditation, to show her the bare, warm place in his heart—and had gone away, not unhappy. If her art were all that he should have to contend with, he could not help promising himself a delicious, although, perchance, a slightly delayed victory.

And now, as he walked quickly in the low, soft light of the coming sunset down the hill-slope, and on through the Winhurst woods, over the little rustic foot-bridge—looking down for a moment at the gay lobelias nodding to the blue dragon-fly that skimmed the tinkling waters, and seeing in their clear depths, he fancied, the image of her exquisite face, he could not help the bound that his heart gave—the great splendid breath of sweet dew-full air that he drew in with such joy—could not help the sense of positive knowledge that one day Louise Peale would be his.

He went on under the shadow of the pines by the narrow path, and then, with a little merry laugh over Mrs. Odlorne's easy and convenient shifting of her successive affinities, he struck into the road, and in a few moments left Miss Winthrop's lands behind him and proceeded on his way back to Curtis's by the highway.

"Mrs. Odlorne!" Jerriss laughs again. "Let me see: first it is Jack—no, no, Prince Charming! To be sure! Who the deuce is he anyway?—the fellow whom Miss Winthrop is so sure Louise"—he blithely thinks of her now, always, as "Louise"—"will like. Confound him! and he comes to-morrow, I believe; or, no! was it to-day? Glad he didn't come."

And so on, and a little of this, that, and the other, until Mr. Jerriss Redlon finds himself sitting at the tea-table, comfortably sandwiched between Mrs. M. Roosevelt Rose and Miss Drummond-Peck, at Curtis's, where he is stopping as well as they.

Redlon was well-born : he could go back a few hundred years, through a very reputable Dutch ancestry on one side of his house, and to a noble progenitor on the other and English side. His father had been a professor of belles-lettres at Amherst, and his mother a favorite contributor, thirty-five years ago, to the magazines of the day. Handsome Tom Redlon died young, leaving a younger wife and five little children, Jerriss being the eldest ; he also left behind him a small house and a few acres of land, and the meagrest kind of a tiny income for the widow to support herself and little ones on. Her health failed ; she could no longer write the pretty stories and clever, tuneful bits of poems that had given her pin-money in her girlhood, and helped to eke out the young professor's rather slender salary ; and it had taken all her resources and strength to look after the household and lay the foundations of education with the children.

At fifteen, Jerriss, always a somewhat studious but bright and witty lad, was teaching the still younger idea how to shoot, at a district school ; at seventeen he made up his mind to, and did, enter Williams College, determining to pull himself through in some fashion, no matter what. He went into service—this boy, in whose fine blue veins ran the good blood of a proud old duke of Charles the Second's day—in the family of one of the professors ; doing anything that was required of him : splitting wood for the big fires, milking the cows, taking them back and forth to pasture in summer, watering the horses, sowing, reaping, weeding, and Ceres knows what besides. His worth soon made itself felt and appreciated, not only in his employer's house, but among his classmates ; and it is safe to say that no man of his year had more or warmer friends than Jerriss Redlon.

He graduated with honor at twenty-one, and cast his first vote about the same time. Two days after Commencement he took a hand-valise, jumped up on the box-seat with "Steve,"

the stage-driver, went to the station, and took the train for Troy, with about ten dollars in his pocket.

He obtained a position the next day as a reporter on the *Troy Times*, at a salary of twelve dollars a week; and after serving his apprenticeship here for little less than a year, with very tolerable advancement, Jerriss went to New York.

For a time his existence was somewhat precarious: he had no regular position; and doing chance work for the papers, and an occasional "acceptance" at the weeklies or the magazines, were his sole dependence for another year. It was about now that he met Mrs. Rose, who took him up, as was her wont with every creature who either wielded the brush, beat the piano, warbled with the voice, or plied the pen; and if Jerriss Redlon went sometimes just a trifle hungry to his dismal hall-bedroom on the fourth floor of a Twenty-third Street boarding-house, there were very soon not a few drawing-rooms where his quiet, genial manners, and his quick repartee and comprehension had made him a favorite.

One day some copy of his chanced to please the editor-in-chief of one of the great dailies. Mr. Redlon was asked to call; Mr. Redlon was engaged for special work; and thereafter Mr. Redlon's path had not been altogether up the hills of life, but rather in its pleasant places.

He had gotten through with all the "unavailable" time of his novitiate in literature. No more unmistakable little parcels of MS. awaited him on the breakfast-plate, always with "Four cents due" staring him in the face from the yellow envelopes; no more reckoning in his bewildered mind, as to whether this story had as yet been sent to that periodical, or even, indeed, if it were worth while to do anything more with the wretched stuff than toss it in the fire—if he had one! No more poems "declined," and neatly restored to their author three months after being sent, accompanied by the pleasant, cheerful, and well-known "printed form." No more sitting up in his cold little six-by-nine, speculating, quill in hand and virgin sheet before him, as to whether there were the least use in marring its spotlessness with an essay or an article. No, no; for Jerriss all this lay dimly in the past, to be smiled at and commiserated a little, and dismissed with a faint sigh for its bit of pathos. All

that he wrote was taken and well paid for; his name soon came to be a bait for the magazine prospectus, and his first novel ran through four editions; but his first *play* ran all over the continent, from Field to McCullough, and then came home permanently, a universally "damned with faint praise" effort. His second met with no better fate; nor a third, nor a fourth.

Meantime his special work on the great daily had bloomed out into his gradually fitting into an editorial position of power and consequence. A brilliant writer, a profound thinker, a keen political looker-on in our tangled Vienna of local government; humorous, caustic, and withal generous and sympathetic, Jerriss Redlon, at the helm of a New York newspaper, had won quite as many friends and partisans as in the bygone days of his college-life.

The Brazilian, his fifth drama, had been read by three New York managers, and declined politely by all; then he sent it up to the *Criterion* one morning, with a few lines hastily scrawled on a pad-sheet. Forman kept it a month, and then wrote a note to say that four or five men about the theatre had read it, and spoken well of it; he should look at it himself the following day, Sunday, and would, if convenient to Mr. Redlon, call upon him on Tuesday after one o'clock. The envelope enclosed a box-order for that evening. Jerriss went; Forman came in during the second entr'acte to see him. He had read *The Brazilian* that afternoon; liked it; wanted it.

And of course he got it.

Mrs. Redlon had died soon after her eldest son's rise of good fortune; two of his sisters were married, one engaged; and the youngest, a boy, was now a junior at his brother's alma mater.

Jerriss's last thoughts, as he struck out of the Winhurst woods to the highway, had been of the gentleman whom it delighted the soul of Mistress Drusilla Odlorne to call Prince Charming; and at about this very moment, this fascinating and altogether laudable person was, if not thinking of Mr. Redlon, at least in very close contemplation of the locality in which Mr. Redlon chanced to be.

Moray Stuart was forty-four years old, and he would have passed even in the open, fair sunlight of a summer's day, for thirty; indeed I am not sure if one would not have instinctively

placed him in the last twenty, rather than even the first thirty. He was overflowing, so to speak, with juvenility—not the maudlin imitation, but the genuine thing. He had his theories on the subject of growing old, which were resolvable into the brief statement, that no one need do so unless he chose; and certainly this man was rather an adequate example of the correctness of his own ideas.

He had known Nina Winthrop from her babyhood up, having been a friend of her mother's before her marriage. To him the daughter had ever been "little Nina,"—now merged into a young-womanhood that had baffled him slightly, when, three years since,—after not seeing her for four,—they had met in Paris. Baffled at first, but charmed as well. After casting over in the recesses of his own mind the various incidents which his past included, Mr. Moray Stuart had calmly determined to marry Miss Winthrop. There was no "if" in the case with him; he acknowledged no "ifs" in connection with himself or his affairs or desires; he never had. And therefore, when he took passage on the *City of Rome*, and when he bought his ticket for Lenox this afternoon, it was with the quiet conviction, that in a month or two he should be engaged to the girl who, upon the whole, suited him better—would suit him better, he thought—in the capacity of wife than any other that he had met. In a certain fashion he loved her—but not as he was destined to love her in the days, not far distant, to meet which he was speeding now, at the rate of thirty-five miles an hour.

As Miss Winthrop had reminded her enthusiastic aunt, Stuart was not well-born; that is to say, his ancestry was not composed of those elements which invite investigation or revel in heraldic emblazonments and genealogical vegetation. His grandfather had been a stone-cutter—an honest Scotchman of the lower orders, who, emigrating to America with a buxom young wife and a few pounds sterling, had, with native shrewdness and long sight, bought a bit of land, sold it to advantage, bought a larger bit, and so on, until his wealth had accumulated with a rapidity that was startling. His one child, a boy, was sparsely educated,—the worthy workman not being too greatly in favor of book-learning, of which he himself had experienced no need,—and therefore found himself, when his

parents were both dead, at the age of twenty-eight, a trifle at sea with the millions suddenly at his command. He hastily went abroad, married in France a woman of his own class, but pretty and refined-looking, and withal ambitious. Their son, in his turn, was educated to the tips of his fingers. Inheriting both his mother's beauty and ambition, brought up until his seventeenth year in the gay capitals of the Continent and under the perpetual care of tutors of all descriptions, Moray Stuart returned to America, where he had been born, went through Harvard with a respectable record, and soon after received an appointment as an attaché of our legation in Paris.

After a couple of years abroad, the sudden death, by a driving accident in the Bois, of both of his parents sent him back to his native land once more, as sole heir of an estate that, in the settling up, dwindled—Mr. and Mrs. Innes Stuart had lived with commendable rapidity and easiness—from millions into lesser figures. This, however, troubled the young man but very little. There was a delicate thrift about him—attenuated remnant of his ancestors' centuries of hard frugality—which was rather gratified than otherwise with the enforced scruples which an income with very decided limits required; and in a short space of time he had the whole machinery of just so many dollars and cents per annum reduced to the exact proportion of affording Moray Stuart, Esq., just precisely the maximum of comfort and pleasure to be derived therefrom.

He had never been seen or known to give away one penny in charity.

He was dainty, without being in the slightest degree effeminate.

He laughed readily, smoothing away the risible wrinkles, whereby such easy mirth mars any face, with the broad, veined, cumbrous, sledge-hammer hand which had come down to him from his stone-cutting grandfather.

He was the soul of suavity,

And the acme of adaptability.

If he had any vices, no one had ever heard of them—unless to be too fascinating to too many women may be accounted a fault.

His virtues were patent to all with whom he came in contact.

Moreover, that faint mysticism which frequently assails the agnostic of the romantic type pervaded him.

He was, people said, "so very original."

Before his father's and mother's deaths, he had made a trip through Scotland with one of his tutors. At Holyrood he had bought one of those little fac-simile seals of the unfortunate Mary's that they sell for a shilling; and forthwith, this very clever young American proceeded both to use the seal for his own domestic and foreign purposes, and to indulge a marvellous cult of the Stuart theme. Ninety-nine people out of a hundred failed to recognize the crest, and the hundredth man—well, so far Mr. Moray Stuart had not yet encountered him; and, indeed, was quite prepared for, when he should.

His own name was Stuart, and a few eloquent phrases, a trifle of Latin, a dash of old French and old Scotch—for he was really a learned man—and the bridge was built, over which he and the inquirer would, he was quite confident, walk jauntily arm-in-arm.

He had remained in New York and Washington for a dozen years or so; then came a trip across the ocean, or to South America, or somewhere—no one knew precisely where—for six months; a glimpse at town in the height of the season; another run over to Europe; back again for a Newport autumn; abroad once more—now meeting Nina Winthrop, whom he saw constantly for three years, as he found it convenient to take up Mrs. Odlorne's route from point to point;—and then home again—in fact, at this moment alighting from the train at Lenox Station and being driven rapidly to Curtis's.

CHAPTER SIXTH.

THE following morning, about nine o'clock, Stuart stood in the little breakfast-room, at Winhurst, alone. He looked wonderfully well, wonderfully young, in his checked, London-made morning suit, the belted blouse giving to his figure just that small flavor of jauntiness which secured to its wearer his own approbation, as he surveyed himself in the long oak-framed mirror in the pier between the two open windows, giving on the latticed balconies, and so to the lawns.

As Mr. Stuart turned from this altogether satisfactory tour of inspection, his quick eye caught, between the rich open carvings of the screen which separated this tiny breakfast-room from its grander neighbor, the ball-room, the glimpse of a woman's figure—lithe, supple, graceful, from the golden head to the small, high-shod feet—a vision in pale violet, that swept slowly across the apartment, and out, apparently, on the veranda, on the other side. Turning thus, and somewhat suddenly, he stumbled against a heavy chair already placed at the table-side, and doubtless it was this fit of awkwardness that caused Prince Charming to utter a muttered, but very decided, curse. In an instant, however, his face recovered its wonted calm, and with a smile, that an unprejudiced observer of human nature might have been betrayed into describing as one of bitter brutality, he quickly walked the width of the room, and placed himself, his back to it, in one of the long French windows.

He stood in the sunshine.

The morning-glories, blue, and white, and pinkly-veined, hung low above his handsome dark head—even one of the frail, pretty blossoms touched his slightly sloping shoulder.

And then the door behind him opened, and the lady in the violet gown, just stepping in, stood still; her right hand caught at the door-frame, and her face, it seemed, became paler even than its wont.

It was Louise.

She said nothing, and for almost a minute she did not move.

Then Stuart, possibly—for he was a man of an extremely sensitive nature—possibly feeling a presence which he could not see, turned his head slowly, and with an ineffable grace, on beholding her, bowed low.

She returned it mechanically, as was natural, not having expected to find a stranger there.

"I am Moray Stuart, at your service," he says, with smiling eyes. "I am an old guest at Winhurst, and arriving late last night, I forbore to disturb Mesdames Châtelaines, and slept at the hotel. But I ventured up to breakfast." His speech is perhaps a trifle long, but it is in excellent taste, thereby allowing the lady sufficient time to recover from her astonishment at finding him there.

"And I am Miss Louise Rogers Peale," she says, in a low tone, "also a guest of Miss Winthrop's."

"Is it possible!" he cries, with a delighted accent. "And have I the pleasure of meeting the Miss Peale of whom I have heard Miss Winthrop speak so warmly, and whose praises I have listened to and read for the past four or five years, abroad?"

"I am she," she replies simply, advancing a step or two into the room, and he at once making, likewise, a movement.

"It is a glorious morning," he says, glancing out. "Will you not step on the balcony and breathe it?"

"Thank you, I believe not."

"Then, let me bring a piece of it in, to you." He breaks a trailing branch of the dewy convolvuli, and offers it to her, with the air of devotion which has earned him his title.

"Thank you, Mr. Stuart—but blue and violet—" indicating her gown, as she lays the flowers on the table—"swear too horribly at each other for me to venture to establish such intimate relations between them. Let me ring for some coffee or chocolate for you." She lays her hand on the silver bell. "Every one breakfasts at Winhurst, as I suppose you know, when one pleases, *sans cérémonie*."

"No, no, I beg of you; I—"

The door opens a second time, and Nina comes in.

"Prince Charming!" the girl cries, extending both hands in welcome. "When did you come? I beg your pardon, Louise

dear, good morning; let me present our old friend, Mr. Stuart, to you. Miss Peale, Mr. Stuart."

Louise bows again.

"Ah, my dear child," holding her hands a moment, as he inclines his head profoundly, "Miss Peale and I, you see, have been making ourselves quite acquainted with each other—Mrs. Odlorne!"

He quits the niece, and with a reverent, restrained, half-tender air, salutes the aunt.

"My Prince!" murmurs Mistress Drusilla, in faint accents, as she realizes with despondent alacrity that the one she wears is not her most alluring and becoming morning gown. "When—how did you come, at this hour?"

"I arrived late last evening; feared to disturb you ladies by the incursion of a tired, hungry man at such an unseasonable hour; slept at Curtis's; walked up the hills, and through the woods, getting here just half-an-hour ago, and hoping not to give you too disagreeable a surprise, as an unexpected guest at your pretty breakfast-table." He places a chair for the widow as he concludes, and another for Nina,—Louise is already seated, and toying with a peach,—and then draws up one for himself.

Mrs. Odlorne touches the bell, and presently Jane is busy with her tray of savory dishes.

"Tea, coffee, or chocolate, Moray?" Mrs. Odlorne asks, when she has served Louise and Nina.

And then, just at this auspicious moment, Jerriss's auburn head shows at the window, and he is bidden welcome; and the two men introduced, and a little rambling chat ensues about this, that, and the other, as egg-shells are broken, toast buttered, and muffins split.

"Prince Charming, I beg your pardon," Drusilla says contritely. "I have forgotten you altogether. Which is it to be—tea, coffee, or chocolate? you did not tell me."

"Neither, I thank you."

"Neither?" with an amazed inflection,

"Ah, I see," he cries dolorously; "out of sight, out of mind! You have quite forgotten my principles. A glass of water, Jane, if you please," turning to the handmaiden. "No

ice, thank you—yes, that will do.” He raises the glass to his lips.

“I had forgotten,” Mrs. Odlorne admits. “I remember now, that you never take anything stronger than that cold crystal beverage; and you never eat anything but fruit, or apple-sauce, or stewed pears, or some such aerial thing, and stale bread.”

“In the mornings,” Mr. Stuart amends, with a little laugh.

“What is the idea, Mr. Stuart?” Jerriss asks, pausing in his evident relish of a piece of juicy steak.

Louise looks up—she has been sipping her chocolate in a half-absorbed fashion all this while; but at last, and for the first time since their unforeseen meeting, she gazes fully into Moray Stuart’s face, and continues to look as he speaks.

“Oh, I don’t know,” the other answers carelessly. “A whim of mine, I suppose; that is all.”

“Nothing of the kind,” Miss Winthrop cries gayly. “The Prince thinks that, by half starving himself, he can subdue Time, and say to Eternity, ‘Thou shalt be forever young!’”

“Dear me!” exclaims Mrs. Odlorne, hastily setting down her cup. “Do you really believe, Moray, that by dieting and that, one can prevent one’s self from growing old looking?” The little widow inclines her well-powdered face, flushing with earnest inquiry.

“Oh,” he responds, laughing with off-hand and amused good-nature, “Miss Winthrop is pleased to amuse herself at my expense. I am willing—nay, content.” He casts a glance, full of the most subtle admiration, toward his younger hostess, as he thinks to himself that never in his life has he seen Nina Winthrop look more fascinatingly beautiful than she does this morning, in her white and yellow frock, with its short bodice and big full sleeves, her brown hair hanging in two school-girl braids below her knees, and the delicious liquid memory of sleep still shining in her eyes.

“Oh!” Mrs. Odlorne sinks back a trifle crestfallen. “I really hoped that you were going to recommend it!” she cries dispiritedly.

“Why, Mrs. Odlorne?” Jerriss inquires, laying a peach that he has delicately peeled, on Louise’s plate, with a quiet glance,

‘Because there is nothing—nothing, even to starvation’s point, that I would not do to ensure a youthful appearance!’

“Auntie!”

“Yes, my dear, I mean it!” The little widow laughs jollily.

“You have no need of any such regimen, so far as I can see,” observes Stuart, gallantly.

“Oh—I mean, of course, that I would do it to keep my youthful appearance intact.”

“Ah! that is better.”

“Well, sweet Prince,” exclaims Nina, “if you don’t confine yourself to stale biscuits, apple-sauce, and water, as a matutinal repast, to preserve your youthful appearance,”—her eyes betray an ominous mirth,—“what do you do it for at all?”

“To preserve my spirit,” he answers seriously. “To preserve my spirit pure, intact, free. Notwithstanding the necessary friction with clods—” Drusilla’s ears are pricked at sound of this word—“I hold that a man may keep himself, by adhering to certain rules of diet, exercise—both mental and physical—uncontaminated by contact—”

“Which otherwise?” Mr. Redlon queries, quietly stirring his cup of steaming coffee.

“Otherwise might very probably soil his soul.”

“I agree with you—I do!” ejaculates Mrs. Odlorne. “Had I not disciplined myself well, in every respect, during my brief married life, my poor good-hearted Peter”—a sigh, which the others feel bound to reproduce in miniature, as the widow’s handkerchief emerges from her pocket—“would have dragged me from the heights on which a refined—alas! a too refined—nature has placed me, down to the level of—of—” It suddenly occurs to Peter’s little relict, that she is in the midst of a very uncomplimentary tribute to his memory.

“This workaday world,” Mr. Stuart concludes sympathetically.

“Yes—exactly.”

“And do you think,” the journalist asks, resuming, “that you can or do succeed, Mr. Stuart, in holding yourself apart from, above, your fellow-beings, by means of these methods?”

“I know it,” the other replies haughtily.

"Ah! And, so much granted, what does this superiority avail you, may I ask?"

"It avails me," the older man replies, pushing back his empty plate, "this: that I can sail along the sea of life, with never one impulse to call it 'troubled;' that I can dispose, with a positive serenity, of what others might term 'ills,' 'misfortunes.'"

Louise again raises her dark, lovely eyes to Mr. Stuart's face, with a glance, this time, of half scornful melancholy.

"That I can never find myself in a position that disturbs or distresses me; that for me, all places, by the mere exercise of my own will, may become to me a paradise, and none ever turn into—the reverse."

"And what, sir, do you do with your human sympathies?" Jerriss says.

"Oh—well—" The inflection is almost dismissing in its levity; then with force. "I will tell you, Mr. Redlon; in brief, I recommend my theory—and my practice—to others."

Redlon looks off out the window, to the smooth-shaven lawns.

"And what is your theory?" inquires Miss Winthrop, with a bright smile.

He returns it with tenfold interest, answering:

"I permit every one to go his or her own course; I offer no advice, make no suggestions, remonstrances, whatever; and in return, I expect, demand, will have," he says, laying down the fruit-knife he has held, with noiseless vehemence upon the board, "a perfect immunity from the faintest shadow of interference with my moods, desires, ideas—foibles, if you will."

"And does Providence"—Louise's voice is low, soft and deep, as she speaks to him—a voice that critics and non-critics have raved enough over—"does Providence, Mr. Stuart, kindly second all your wishes, or do you occasionally condescend to accommodate yourself to—the caprices of what we call Destiny?" She smiles a slow, hesitating smile.

"Oh!" he laughs readily, "always. I am the most obliging votary of Fate imaginable; I never fail to 'fall desperately in love with the inevitable'!"

"How fortunate!" ejaculates Nina—"for Fate, of course!"

"Ah, don't be too hard on me!" he exclaims, laughing again.

"No, no; I hold that the world owes me just such and such a proportion of happiness, *bien-être*, ease—rapture,"—his light, cold eyes fall upon Nina's sparkling face,—“and I do not intend that any bungling of my own or any one's else shall cheat me of my dues.” Moray Stuart's voice is hard, and strong as iron, as it rings out; it is as if he were combating some unseen opposition, and throwing down to it both the gauntlet of defiance and the scourge of a threatened revenge.

"Sensible man!" the journalist endorses. "By the way, Mr. Stuart, how did you leave the other side? They tell me you have just come over."

"Peaceful. Nothing new; not even a new king for poor Bulgaria. What is the excitement in Lenox, ladies?" He turns a courteous, inclusive glance to all three.

"The same old story!" the widow says, resignedly.

"Oh, come now, Aunt Druse, that is rather too bad, when we have—" Nina laughs mischievously over at Louise and Jerriss.

"The Drummond-Pecks," the latter adds, with a magniloquent gesture.

"And what are they, pray? Wagons, horses, flowers, people?"

"Exotics," murmurs Redlon, under his breath, as Miss Winthrop replies.

"They are people—three people, with a paternal and marital fourth, in Europe—a mother and two daughters!"

"Peck—Peck," Stuart repeats reflectively. "I met three Pecks going up the Rhine from Cologne to Mayence, last summer."

"And you?" cried Nina. "What were your Pecks like, Prince?"

"Like? Well, my Princess, they were unlike any of my intimate friends, but doubtless bore a very strong resemblance to a great many of my fair compatriots!"

"Of course it is our Pecks. You know, Nina, some one said that the Drummond prefix was all an invention of Mrs. Rose's," cries Mrs. Odlorne.

"And, *à propos*, how is Mrs. Rose?"

"In clover!" Jerriss responds cheerfully.

"Yes?"

"Yes—has the Pecks in tow."

"Ah! Let me see: there was Madame Peck, astoundingly rich—triple-plated, so to speak, with dollars from head to foot, and embalmed in diamonds—and confiding to a degree; in one hour she had told me the exact cost of all her wardrobe, and of those of—what were their names? Josie? Yes, Josie and—"

"Ida?" queries Nina.

"Precisely. Fine, large girls, with three hundred and sixty-five gowns apiece, besides I don't know how many millions."

"Of course they are our Pecks!" puts in Drusilla.

"Did you say you met them on the Rhine?"

"Yes, Miss Nina; and I am sorry to admit that from afar I scented the natives of my esteemed country."

"How?" inquires the widow.

"Oh, the headlights, of course," Jerriss says calmly.

"The diamonds—exactly. Moons of flashing radiance in all six ears, from daybreak until midnight!"

"Well," Miss Winthrop remarks, "they are here, armed and accoutred with a dozen carriages, half a dozen grooms, and I don't know how many horses."

"And also Mrs. Rose—do not, for social science's sake, forget Mrs. Rose!"

"Mr. Redlon! Yes, then, Mrs. Rose."

"Do they—do you—" Moray hesitates.

"Oh yes, we 'do,'" Nina nods. "My dear Mr. Stuart, the Whittemores have given them a garden-party, and the Turners, and the Mattocks, and the Rivers, and everybody else, have asked them, so of course we 'do.'"

"They were immensely entertaining," Stuart says, smiling.

"Beyond a doubt. By the bye, Aunt Druse, suppose we give them a garden-party, week after next—shall we, Lou?"

"To be sure!" Louise leans back languidly, while Redlon fans her.

"Well, my dear, just as you say. I am sure you know well enough that I am a complete cipher at Winhurst. Just as you say, my dear."

"Oh, auntie! Well, then, we will give it on—let me see,

Wednesday—that does not interfere with anything, does it? no; Wednesday of week after next.”

Mrs. Odlorne rises from the table; the others follow her example, Prince Charming getting beside the martyred matron, and bending over her with sympathetic half-tones, as they quit the room together.

Louise starts to leave her chair; but she falters, almost falls, would have completely, had not Ferriss's ready arm upheld her.

“You are ill!” he cries, alarmed.

“Oh, no, no!” she answers faintly; “only a little weary, that is all.”

“You have been studying too hard! For my—Louise! for your own sake, then, take care of yourself—” His anxious eyes try to read all the sweet pallor of her face aright, but stop short, puzzled, as she speaks.

“For my own sake!” she whispers, staggering a little as she catches unwillingly at his arm again—“my own sake”—in a dazed way—“oh no, not that—for—*Dolor*’s sake, I will! Thank you, Mr. Redlon,” as Nina comes back to seek her; and then the three soon separate—Miss Peale to her room, Mr. Redlon to a moody contemplation of nature and life, in the village of Lenox, and Miss Winthrop to a visit to the stables, to pet her ponies, Poppet and Peacock.

She saw Mrs. Odlorne as she walked across the flower-garden; who, with Mr. Stuart, was sitting, chatting busily, in the lower floor of the two-storied summer-house; and the little widow's blonded head was waving ominously back and forth, as she plained—

“Ah, my dear Moray, you ask for my confidence? It is already yours. Winhurst, I am sorry, sorry to be compelled to say, seems, of late, to be turning into a play-house.”

“Indeed!” murmurs Stuart, with a proper infusion of dismay and condolence, in his tone. “Have you been having private theatricals often? Has Miss Peale—”

“Private theatricals!” echoes Mistress Drusilla, with uplifted orbs and palms. “I, with my limited knowledge of such things,”—Mrs. Odlorne ejaculates the last two words as if their meaning entailed an indigenous and shocking obloquy upon the case in hand,—“of course am no judge; but I should

suppose that, as Miss Peale had been rehearsing *The Brazilian* in town, from early in May up to a few weeks since, she might now cease." Moray bows an affirmative head. "And then, we have the manager of the Criterion here for luncheon; and at least five reporters for as many different newspapers to interview 'the new star;' and cables from Worth about her toilettes; and dispatches from the creature they call the 'leading man,' about some mysterious thing they call the 'business;' and whenever we go anywhere,—receptions, teas, balls, breakfasts, tennis matches, no matter where,—the actress is the cynosure of all eyes! For my part, I think Nina makes a great mistake—a huge mistake."

"Dear me, dear me!" exclaims her companion, sadly.

"Did you ever see her act?" Drusilla asks.

"No, never. I have been abroad so long; besides," he adds, with a little shrug, "the amateur actress never fetched me particularly."

Mr. Stuart has the rare good sense to preserve the balance of power in social tactics, by never betraying the slightest interest in one woman, whilst in the society of another; moreover, he has the equally uncommon clear sight to know, that by preserving an uninterrogative silence, his fair companion will eventually favor him with nothing less than Miss Peale's history, from her birth up to the present moment—which she accordingly proceeds to do, he lending an attentive ear, as he negligently switches the flower-tops with his cane.

In fifteen minutes Mr. Stuart was possessed of all the information he could possibly desire concerning his beautiful fellow-guest; and, Drusilla concluding breathlessly, he turned, with an apparently ill-concealed yawn, saying, "Altered her name to Peale, so as to inherit the maternal uncle's fortune, eh?"

"Yes, and at once went to Europe. Ellen Terry gave her some lessons in London, and she studied very hard with Reginald and Mademoiselle Bartet in Paris."

"Um! Well, now to yourself. Tell me, how are you?"

Moray is quite clever enough to know that he has to secure, and keep, in the frisky and sentimental aunt, an ally at Winhurst toward winning the niece; although, it may be, an unconscious one. He intends that Mrs. Odorne shall make his Lenox

visit as pleasant as—she could be capable of making it unpleasant, were her whims not paid some little attention to.

“Ah!” sighs the little widow, “I absolutely don’t know how I am! With all this professional jargon, and nothing but ‘quick study’ and ‘lines,’ in one ear; and ‘left upper’ and ‘right lower,’ in the other, I am almost distracted!”

“Borrow a little of my optimism, my dear Mrs. Odlorne; don’t let Miss Peale’s presence disturb you—any more than it does me, *par exemple!*”

“But you can’t take up a paper at any time, anywhere, without your eyes falling on her name, or some account of her gowns, or her rôles, or what the Prince of Wales said when she played before him in London, at Lady Hilda Treherne’s—Nina and I were there—and then Nina’s name comes in, and my own, and—”

“Well, well; she is well-born, handsome, charming, or you say so; *que voulez-vous!* A certain style of woman must make herself conspicuous; and, since Nina likes her—”

“I know, I know, poor thing! There is nothing against her, nothing—but—” Mrs. Odlorne turns two bright brown eyes up to Moray, in an unsuccessful attempt at pathos, and cries out softly, but irrelevantly, “O Prince Charming! I have sadly needed your counsel, your advice. What am I, alone? A frail little bark, tossed hither and thither; I require a compass, a spiritual rudder, so to speak—”

“You do, you do,” assents Prince Charming, with the immaculate tone and air which made Tom Hammond say that, were he a woman, he would prefer to listen to “It’s a wet day, isn’t it?” from Stuart’s lips, to a proposal from most other man’s.

“I need the strong arm—” Drusilla glances pensively at the one lying on the seat-rail behind her plump back—“of—of friendship to support me.”

“And have you not it?” he inquires reproachfully,

And presently, Mr. Stuart, finding it necessary to return to the hotel to pay his bill, and to order his traps sent up to Winhurst, discovers himself, after declining Mrs. Odlorne’s proffered hospitality of horse and cart, not far behind the tall, half-awkward, lounging figure of Mr. Jerriß Redlon,

He hurries on and soon overtakes him.

It is no part of Prince Charming's general scheme of life to allow the journalist to remain in the half-antagonistic frame of mind which, he is fully aware, was the result of their breakfast-table chat this morning.

He made his point then and there, whatever it may have been.

And now, linking his hand familiarly, and yet with a perfect mixture of good breeding and bonhomie, in Redlon's arm, the quite, but by no means too, self-confident Prince has established, with very small expenditure of trouble, and in a very short time, the pleasantest sort of relations between himself and his companion.

The two men saunter slowly down the path to the village, each meeting, now and again, an acquaintance afoot or driving chatting of art and music, the drama,—deftly introduced by the older,—and presently *The Brazilian*, in which Stuart expresses a hearty interest.

Jerriss, clear-headed, guileless, unsuspecting, but by no means one of those men to be taken up and laid down at pleasure and leisure, experiences a certain gratification in Stuart's society.

The latter was a comprehending man; one of those who understood a *demi-mot*; and who, to a genuine love of the arts, literature, players, and the light sciences, added a certain grace of diction in expressing, himself a quiet picturesqueness of appreciation in his apposite and well-rounded remarks, which pleased Mr. Redlon's æsthetic sense, and at the same moment, satisfied his rather exacting intellectual demands.

When he reached his room, and as he cut open the wrapper of his last evening's New York paper, Jerriss, with a slight amused smile of reminiscence of the conversation at Winhurst, with Mr. Stuart; and the conversation during their walk to Curtis's, with the added memory of two or three of Prince Charming's clever little glances Drusilla-ward, unavoidably recalled to himself the apt utterance of Horace: "*In se totus, teres, atque rotundus.*"

CHAPTER SEVENTH.

SATURDAY dawned, as brilliant an early autumn day as could be desired, and in its young mistress's eyes, Winhurst had never looked more lovely than it did under this arch of marvellous blue, unflecked by even a foamy wind-cloud; beneath this soft dazzling sunshine, that lay in great lengths and breadths upon the shaven emerald lawns, glinting between the tree-boles, shining on the fair slim trunks of the white birches, and warming the moon-flowers into a dazzle of bloom, where they climbed up the gnarled post on the slope. The nasturtiums showed a blaze of splendid color over the trellis near the carriage-porch; the wisteria's leaves had yellowed with the bite of September's first cold breath; and the Virginia creeper, with its gorgeous scarlet clusters mingled with the thick mat of the ivies that covered the western wall, had crept, with all a lush, hot summer's spread and growth, around the eaves of the gallery above the music and breakfast rooms, and twined itself in and out with the feathery wind-blown blossoms of the clematis.

The flower-gardens lay bathed in the mellow lights, all the gaudy glories of asters, and dahlias, and marigolds flaming amid the soft dark greens of leaf and shrub.

Miss Winthrop, however, took little heed of all of this, and, with the dogs—escaping the vigilant but ever non-intrusive eye of her guest, Mr. Stuart—she walked past the home land, and through the woods, to the wide reach of meadows that bordered with a willow fringe the silvery pretty lake. She crossed, with quick feet, the small stretch of pebbly road, low-lying and half marshy, between the waters and the fields,—Louise saw her, as she leaned for a brief moment at her window,—and then, striking once more into the forest, she soon gained the width of a little upland lane.

Here the golden-rods grew in profusion, and it was for the golden-rods that Miss Winthrop had come out. She had a vague memory of some one's saying that they liked the "warmth of yellow," and she intended that the dinner-table that day

should show no other color in its decoration. Somewhat impeded, it is true, by the antics of the Messrs. Jasper, Cockatoo, Periwinkle, and Spot, their mistress finally had broken as much golden-rod as she could carry, and presently set forth on her homeward path, with the four dogs bounding and capering about her.

She had gotten to the end of the lane, and stood for a moment looking at the lake, half in the sunshine, half in the shadow, a happy smile parting her lovely lips. In her little white frock, with its short surplice bodice, and her white sailor-hat, with her arms full of the great yellow branches, Nina made as lovely a picture as eye of man might ever wish to see.

"Good-morning, Miss Winthrop!"

"Mr. Van Cortland!" She puts out a half-timid little hand, while a great swift blush dyes both her round cheeks rose-red.

It is eagerly taken in both of his.

"They told me you had gone out somewhere; and a perfect interposition of Providence guided my footsteps aright."

"Welcome to Winhurst," she says with simple grace. "It is Winhurst land, although I am sorry that I was not at the house to greet you there."

"I had rather it were here," he says, looking down at her from his magnificent height. "Let me take those flowers for you, may I not? There. And now, how are you? tell me."

"Perfectly well; and your lordship?"

"Perfectly well," he echoes, his tone implying all that his blue eyes, drinking in the soft, sweet beauty of the woman beside him, have been saying, ever since the first moment they rested upon her figure.

"You saw auntie at the house, of course?" she asks quickly.

"Oh yes! Mrs. Odlorne I saw, and also Miss Peale—who gave me a hint of the direction you had taken. And I met Redlon too; it was rather of a surprise; I did not know he was here yet."

"Oh yes—and isn't he just the nicest fellow in the world?"

"A capital fellow! On the whole, I don't know that there is a man whom I care more for than I do for Jerriss. Have you many guests at Winhurst?" he inquires, with the frankness which his intimacy at the house permits,

"Oh dear, no! Aunt Druse dies daily over her household cares as it is, and we are only—let me see—only Miss Peale and Moray Stuart, beside ourselves."

"Stuart! Is he in the States? I fancied him in Europe."

"He only got home last week. I am awfully sorry that I haven't a lot of pretty girls for you," she says lugubriously, "but you won't mind their not being in the house, you will meet such a number everywhere."

"I don't seem to think I shall mind the omission very much," he returns, with a little gleeful laugh. "I came, don't you know, to see—you—and not other women."

"*À propos*," she exclaims hastily, ignoring this last, and the half-stop he makes in the narrow shady path, "there is a great pile of invitation-cards waiting for you in your room. Everybody knew, you know, that you were booked for Winhurst for September—"

"Booked for paradise!" he interrupts in a low tone.

"It is a lovely place, is it not? Ah, you don't wonder, do you, that we Berkshire people rave over our county—and our hills? Just look yonder!" Miss Winthrop makes an abrupt little turn, as they emerge from the woodland foot-path, to a knoll at the end of the lower road.

The hills—rising above one another, slope melting into slope, and hollows filled with hillocks' tops—surround them; the dark, peaceable, restful hills, their swelling outlines sharp against the heavenly azure; here and there a maple, already a-blush with the kiss of the autumn sun, and, in the brush, the long, slender branches of the sumac, scarlet as spilt wine. To the far south, the Dome stands sentinel, and all about, as far as eye can see, the chain of beautiful mountains, of which it ever seems the perfect clasp. At their feet the Bowl, glistening and dimpling in that mirthful, laughing fashion that water has when lying under a sky like this; a boat or two, with sails furled, sidle at the tiny pier on the Winhurst side, and the Dutch cows, with their sleek black and white satin coats, are chewing the cud of a sweet and verdant fancy on the upland meadows.

"It is lovely," he assents warmly. "You like the country?" he adds, gazing into her enthusiastic face.

"Like it!" she cries. "I would not live in town—except for a

two months' 'height of the season' "—with a delicious little laugh—"for anything. Oh! think of it, to lead one's life—one's glorious, whole life—in a stone-faced mansion, with walls on two sides of one, and windows on the other two—other people's walls! other people's windows! Do you know," she says confidentially, "that after I have been in town for eight or nine weeks, I get to hate my kind so, that I sometimes think I am a complete heathen. And after all, I do not believe we were ever intended to jostle each other perpetually, the way we do—do you?"

"Most certainly not. What a lot of nice people there are, to meet," he says with a smile, "and yet, to be shut up in the house with them, they appear—and very likely so would I—like drivelling idiots."

"Yes; I need space, air, light, on all sides of me. Indeed, I have occasionally thought that there was nothing so charming about people as the fact that I could get away from them."

"Do you feel so to—every one?" he asks seriously.

"No, but to a great many. Don't you?"

"Perhaps—to all—but one."

"Yes," Miss Winthrop resumes rapidly. "There is to be the Whittemore ball, quite the smartest affair of the season, I dare say—that is Monday night—and then the Turners are giving a garden-party on Tuesday, and the Mattocks a tea the same afternoon, and on Wednesday the subscription ball at the Casino; Thursday the tennis tournament; Friday—"

"Hold, enough!" he cries playfully, "I have been promising myself the quietest sort of a time here, with you, and I find a vortex awaiting me."

"Oh!" she cries as gayly, "you, with your way of life, would die of *ennui*, if you were to have been here last month, or in July, for instance. Auntie and I chose just now for your visit, so that you should have all the amusement that was possible."

"And what is my 'way of life'?" Mr. Van Cortland inquires, with an amused look lurking about the corners of his handsome, full mouth.

"I—am sure I—don't know," she confesses frankly, laughing outright; "but I imagine it to be—"

"Well, what?"

"Oh, you know: a round of dinners and suppers, and races and balls, and theatres and clubs, and—and that."

"You don't think, then, that I, for example, would care very much about a life in the country?"

"Frankly, no."

"Ah, I thought not," soberly. "But I would. Strange as it may seem, my entire time is not entirely given up to feeding, betting, dancing, the opera-box, and cards—"

"I did not mean—" she stammers.

"Oh!" he cries, a little bitterly, and then bites in his red lips until they show the white, "I had thought that you—it was presumptuous of me, truly, to fancy you gave me a thought at all—but I had been such a fool as to imagine that you knew me a little better than—this." He turns pained eyes away from the sweet, troubled face.

"Don't be vexed," she says, in a low voice. "I—I was half in jest; I know that—"

"That I am a man, as well as—an animal!" he exclaims, with a smile only too ready to greet her uplifted lovely eyes.

"A great deal of one—and a little of the other," she says earnestly.

"Which?—and which?" Mr. Van Cortland inquires.

"Ah, you know!"

"A great deal of brute—and a very inadequate proportion of man, I suppose," ruefully.

Nina laughs.

They have reached the bit of straggling, pebbly roadway now, with the lake on one hand, and the damp pool under the swamp willows' drooping shade, on the other. Through the thick tangle of wild ivy and grapevines—the rich odor of the latter freights all the air about—that climb and twist, in and out, and over and under, the unkept, straggling hedge of arbor-vitæ, it is just possible to discern a wooden paling and a rotting gate, loose on its hinges, and half driven into the muddy hollow where it hangs.

"You would not believe that there was a house, a large, handsome house, in yonder, would you?" Nina says, pausing for a moment.

"No, indeed! And is there? I can see, or I fancy I see, a gate among all this tangle and growth; but a house—"

He looks in a puzzled way into the darkness beyond the thicket. "It seems more like the primeval forest than a human dwelling!"

"There is one, though, hemmed in by trees,—almost as bad as people and walls," laughs Miss Winthrop.

"Almost," he assents; "and much more damp and unwholesome, perhaps. "Whose place is it, do you know?"

"Moray Stuart's."

"Indeed! I did not know he owned anything in this region."

"Oh dear, yes; acres upon acres. He has never lived here though, for a month, even; it was a whim of his grandfather's, I believe."

"It looks all waste land round about."

"That it is. Wastelands is the name of the place," Nina laughs.

"Surely no misnomer. Stuart never opens the house, you say?"

"Oh no! Only fancy Prince Charming in such a spot; he worships the sunshine, and light, and air, and freedom as much as—I do!" Van Cortland looks down quickly and sharply into her buoyant, brilliant face.

"Yes?" he says courteously.

"Dear me, yes! The poor fellow would die in such a spot as this. Oh! there he comes now! *Parlez d'un ange*—"

"Miss Nina!" Moray lifts his hat with graceful courtesy, and extends his hand with empressement to Jack.

"Van Cortland, how are you?"

"Mr. Stuart, how do you do? It is—let me see—a year and more since we met—and then, at Monte Carlo!"

"I believe you are right."

"I was losing—of course; and you winning, I suppose, like the lucky man you always are!"

"By no means," returns Stuart, with a firm, icy smile glancing off his lips; "I never play, sir."

"No small vices?" laughs Van Cortland, good-humoredly.

"Mr. Stuart only indulges in the large ones," Nina says.

"I think no one has ever been able to accuse me of any," Moray remarks determinedly, while he again smiles.

"Ah!" cries the other man, mirthfully, "the Chinese idea, eh? not found out!"

"That is it," Miss Winthrop laughs.

"It must be, since you say so." Prince Charming bends upon her a bewildering glance.

"Ah, by the way—don't you smoke, Stuart?"

"No, sir, I do not."

"He would sooner die, Mr. Van Cortland!"

"Why?" Jack inquires innocently.

"Oh, because smoking makes a man look old too soon!"

"Ah, come now, Miss Nina, that ~~is~~ rather too bad. By-the-bye, I don't know if you are aware of it or no, but this," glancing toward the tumble-down gate, "is my threshold. I do not dare, Miss Nina, to bid you enter, for I am just coming down now to have a look at the place, and I have not been inside the doors in years!"

"Is it possible!" exclaims Jack, for the lack of something else to say, he being none too deeply interested in the affairs of the slim, handsome gentleman who has interrupted his *tête-à-tête* walk with Miss Winthrop.

"Yes. I sent a lot of bric-à-brac, and that, up here the other day. I am going to have it unpacked," he adds, turning exclusive eyes to Nina, "and then you must promise me to come down some day and see it, and go over the old house with me—will you?"

"By all means!" cries the girl. "That will be lovely! We will make up a party. I will ask the Pecks and Mrs. Rose—she adores curios; so does Louise,—and we will have a charming time—won't we?" turning to Van Cortland.

"Delightful, I am sure," he replies, with spirited courtesy, as he wonders how much longer this "beggarly intruder" (mental designation for the irreproachable Moray) is going to keep them standing at what the latter is pleased to term "his threshold."

"You don't object, do you?" shifting her gaze to the older man's face.

"To nothing that Miss Winthrop proposes. I will have the place swept and garnished."

"When were you inside your own door last, Mr. Stuart?" Nina queries, inclining her head in recognition of his deferential assurance of putting his mansion in order against her coming.

"Oh! years, years ago!" he responds lightly.

"How odd! I should think that it would be very much more neighborly, and that, if you cut down the forest, and drained the marsh, and—and—"

"Gave a house-warming!" concludes Jack, with impatient jocularity.

"Yes, of course," Nina assents.

"So I will." Moray bends upon the laughing, lovely face two eyes full of impassioned meaning. She turns away to pat Cockatoo's restless head, and Mr. Van Cortland says, in a pleasant, high, commonplace key,

"By-the-way, Stuart, how far is it from here to Winhurst, do you chance to know?"

"Two miles and a half by the road, and about a third of that distance coming through the woods and the lane."

"Ah, yes." Jack casts a little side-glance at Miss Winthrop, secretly wondering how much longer she will stand at this particular spot.

"Well," she says finally, "we will not keep you from your tour of inspection any longer, Prince Charming;" she moves off a step—"you will be home for luncheon, surely?"

"By all means." He lifts his hat, and, kicking aside the tumble-down wicket, the graceful master of Wastelands is, in a moment more, lost to sight through the deep shadow of the trees and underbrush.

"The Italian proverb does not seem to hold good with—our friend," Mr. Van Cortland remarks, glancing over his shoulder at the presumable portal of Mr. Stuart's domain.

"How so?"

"*'Ad ogni uccello suo nido è bello.'*"

"By no means. I think, indeed, that he hates the place. I am only surprised that he is proposing to open it—for a day.

You see"—Miss Winthrop smiles to herself slowly—"his grandfather built the house—himself."

"Yes?"

"Yes; literally piled stone upon stone, and worked, don't you know, with his own hands at it."

"Ah, I see! Genealogical souvenirs are not always soothing to aristocratic nerves!" Jack laughs.

"You very bad boy!"

"Am I?" The "very bad boy's" expression of countenance under rebuke is indicative of hilarious content. To him, these are the friendliest words that Miss Winthrop has ever uttered. He looks down at her, his whole sweet, strong soul shining in his eyes, but he merely says,

"I do not have to go very far afield for the fellow-feeling; there is a tradition of a dead and gone Van Cortland who actually lost his head at the public expense."

"How long since?" laughs she.

"Oh, only some three centuries or so, I believe."

"Further removed—a little—than poor Moray's grandfather."

Poor Moray!

The two words echo in Jack's ears. Pshaw! Thank the gods! Well, and what for?

That now, this moment, he is with her, and the other man—is not: that is really all that there is to sound the gods' praises for, so far.

And yet, it seems enough to him, as he saunters along in the perfect weather at her side; now and again her glance meeting his, as they chat on idly of this, and that—and nothing much in fact; half a dozen times his big, handsome hand closing gently over the little fingers, as he helps her up the path or down, and all the while his being steeped in the luxurious consciousness of her nearness to him, and of their farness from every one else—

For half an hour.

Then Miss Winthrop leaves him to Louise and Jerriss and Mrs. Odlorne, and goes off to Jane with many instructions concerning her golden-rod decorations for the dinner-table.

These given, she runs gleefully upstairs with the four dogs

at her heels, and finds upon her toilet-table a big box, duly inscribed with her name.

A big box of violets, dewy, sweet, and cool; in their midst lies an exquisitely wrought silver bonbonnière lined with white satin, and filled with those impossible things, violets glacées.

No card; no note.

As the rich color creeps into her face, Nina gathers up two hands-full of the flowers and buries her face in their fragrance; and then, like a child, she sits down on the bed and stares at them, and caresses them, and laughs softly to herself.

Jasper, not as æsthetic in his tastes as possibly he might be, interrupts this maiden rhapsody of his mistress's with a playful bound after the bonbons.

And then, all the flowers are put in bowls and vases of water, and the silver box is thrust into a drawer; and Miss Winthrop chooses just two dark, double violets, and pins them dimly between the laces at her throat, and goes slowly down the staircase and toward the library, where she knows the others are sitting.

She pauses at the lower end of the corridor, and her hand goes up instinctively to that filmy lace on her bosom.

Moray! Could they be Moray's gift? Well, even so; he is not here yet, and it is easy to lose two little violets before Prince Charming can possibly get back from Wastelands.

Mrs. Odlorne is writing letters at her secretary—her back is to the door; Miss Peale is gazing abstractedly out of the window, with a book in her hand; Mr. Van Cortland, with a newspaper erectly held, is staring almost wistfully at the arch, as Nina enters the room.

He starts as he sees her, and the great gladness of his face, as he rises, Nina Winthrop remembers many a time in the future.

She knows then that Moray Stuart did not send her violets that day.

"Thank you," Jack says, in a little whisper, rustling his morning paper with extraordinary energy as he speaks.

"For what?" she asks, with innocent, wide eyes.

His own are riveted on the tiny flowers she wears; it is reply sufficient.

She says nothing, but gently, timidly, she takes one of the violets from its resting-place and holds it out to him.

"God bless you!" cries he wildly, under his breath.

"Let me pin it in your button-hole," Miss Winthrop suggests matter-of-factly, as Mistress Drusilla turns about in her chair.

"No—oh no!" He goes toward the bay-window, stooping to pat Periwinkle on his way; he presses the little flower to his lips, and thrusts it quickly in his breast-pocket.

And Mrs. Odlorne murmurs, as she pauses, pen in hand, over her closely written sheet: "Give me sentiment, my dear; love and affection are the staff of life!" and resumes her writing.

Jack, with a small smile and a deep-drawn breath, says "Amen."

CHAPTER EIGHTH.

THE Drummond-Pecks were satisfied, entirely so—which is saying a good deal; for the reason that their social ambitions had been in nowise hampered by the faintest knowledge of the strength and height of the barriers which they yearned to o'er-leap.

These, however, thanks to the remarkably well-planned, and thoroughly well-executed tactics of Mrs. Rose, they had, as it were, cleared with a very few bounds.

In point of fact, the amiable family of William Peck were now the occupants of a tolerably safe seat in the social saddle; and it was not far off the truth to say, that the ambition of the worthy Cattle King was in a very fair way to being gratified.

Mrs. Rose had been calm, determined, and unflinching in the launch of her latest protégées; she had administered the gilded pill with a dauntless front, and with an innocent-appearing courage that was well-nigh superb in its assumption of infantile guilelessness.

Indeed, she enacted with such consummate, placid self-confidence, the rôle of finding in the Drummond-Pecks a trio of

ladies eminently fitted by nature and position to shine in the firmament of society, that, presently, not only did they find themselves quite in the swim, but they forgot that they had ever been out of it—and—"By Jove!" as Mr. Redlon accurately exclaimed, "so did every one else."

The charge of Mrs. Rose had been, so far, rather an arduous one; it was not amusing—although it might, perchance, have proved so to a third party—to give the Drummond-Pecks practical, illustrated, morning lessons in the art of entering and quitting a drawing, or dining, or ball room, with that ease and grace which are thought to be necessary in the world in which they ardently aspired to move. Nor was it altogether an entertaining feature of Mrs. Roosevelt Rose's daily existence that she should, with the aid of the surreptitiously imported knife, fork, spoon, and glass, strive to impart unto Mrs. Drummond-Peck and her offspring the usual methods of polite society in the manipulation of these appurtenances of the table. Nor, it must be confessed, was it a thing of joy to spend a couple of hours per diem, endeavoring to imbue these three ladies with a semblance of regard for the hitherto lacerated grammar of their native language. Nor can it be said that it had proved aught save a weariness to the flesh of Mrs. Rose, to exercise over the voices, general manners, and deportment of the young heiresses and their mamma that vigilant general supervision, which urged her perhaps twenty times in the course of twenty-four hours to glide gracefully *in medias res*, as her pupils gave evidence of a disposition to relapse into the vernacular and the behavior of the great State of Texas.

But now—it had become slightly *autre chose*; Mrs. Rose took breath, and with a not dissatisfied eye, surveyed the well-sown field of her six months' labors.

The Drummond-Pecks were accepted, received.

There had been demurrers; there had even been something resembling an open rebellion; but, upon this troubled sea, the Rose—having once embarked—sailed serenely, smilingly, sublimely, and metallically on.

They had been talked over, questioned of, discussed, and at last dismissed—from conversation: and this was precisely what Mrs. Rose desired. She had contended within herself

that her serenity, her nerve, her pen, and her experience—setting aside her power as an undeniable leader—were worth but little if she could not succeed in comfortably establishing the Drummond-Pecks in that unnoticeable and matter-of-course footing in the world which would charm them, and at the same moment place at her discreet disposal a magnificent town-house, a villa at Newport, another at Lenox, and a season or two in her beloved London and Paris.

And she was quite correct.

Mrs. Odlorne and, consequently, Miss Winthrop had held off with a courteous reticence; but now! even they— At the present moment Mrs. Rose held in her plump fingers, as she sat in the parlor before the open, bright fire, the dainty invitations for the breakfast that Nina had a fortnight since announced her intention of bidding the Drummond-Pecks to assist at.

She smiled faintly, raising her sparse eyebrows as she spoke, glancing at the silver-lettered sheet.

“‘To meet Miss Peale.’”

“So I see,” Mrs. Drummond-Peck murmurs, between a mental calculation of the possible cost and consequent splendor of gold lettering on the cards for a ball which she has in her mind’s eye, for next season in town.

“How lovely!” cries Josephine. “I suppose it’s a kind of society, swell farewell to her, before she goes on the stage.”

“Mr. Redlon tells me that that is the idea.”

“Is that so?” exclaims Ida, whom no-power on earth can divorce from her conversational familiar. “Oh, Count!” This addendum as a thin, dark, little gentleman, whose costume is as strictly intended to convey the impression of an enthusiasm for “*le sport*,” as his little countenance inevitably delineates an antipathy to any hazardous undertaking—save one, enters the room.

“Mademoiselle!” The little gentleman makes a pretty, ecstatic little run to the side of Miss Drummond-Peck, and then sinks into a rocking-chair, spreading his small hands to the grateful blaze the while.

The Count de Vervan had, off and on, for some seasons past, been the protégé of Mrs. Rose; he was genuine as to title, but

his estate, like that of many another foreign gentleman of unimpeachable manners, was located on that as yet undiscovered Spanish main—which, on the whole, must be tolerably well built up by this time.

The Count was in search of a wife—indeed, had been in more or less active pursuit of this desirable feature of domestic life, for some time past. Fortune had not, hitherto, smiled upon him; but finally, it seemed as if his most ardent wishes—and those of a great number of other tradespeople—were about to be gratified.

Miss Drummond-Peck had a fortune—*colossale*, as the Count had already cabled to some humble acquaintances dealing in cloth, in the rue de la Paix; De Vervan had a title, flawless, clear: *tiens*! an exchange of one for the other—what the Americans call “the trade”—what more natural and simple?

Nothing, it seemed to him. And mademoiselle—young, not too ugly, nor too fat; while as to himself—*assurément*, there could not be two opinions; all the De Vervans were noticeably distinguished, and, *parbleu*! perhaps sometimes—who can say?—too fascinating.

In short, this desirable little gentleman only awaited the return from foreign travel of Monsieur Peck to confer upon him the honor of proposing himself as a suitable son-in-law, and as a husband for Mademoiselle Drummond-Peck.

Mrs. Rose, in her wildest moments, had hardly aspired to a valid nobleman as an aide-de-camp, and certainly not during the, as it were, trial season, of her newly-found friends.

“Mademoiselle,” murmured the Count again.

“You have received an invitation from Mrs. Odlorne and Miss Winthrop, have you not, Count?” Ida asks, touching the envelope in her lap.

“Yes, certainly. We go?”

“To be sure!”

“We wouldn’t miss that for anything!” cries Mrs. Drummond-Peck.

“Of course not, madame,” returns the noble gentleman with warmth.

“I wonder if Miss Peale will recite anything?”

“Nonsense, Josephine, my dear; of course not!”

"But, Mrs. Rose, she might. There, here is Mr. Hammond; I shall ask him: he will know; they have always acted together. Oh, pshaw! he isn't coming in after all!" as Mr. Tom Hammond, after a covert survey of the group about the fire, saunters carelessly off in an opposite direction.

As Josephine had surmised, the breakfast was intended by Nina as a compliment to Louise on the eve of her *début*, and the young hostess had left nothing undone to render the affair as charming and pleasurable as possible.

As a pretty tribute to Louise's gown, which was to be white, the decorations of all the little tables, scattered *al fresco*, some in the breakfast-room, some on the porch, the piazza, and in the square hall, with its winding, carved Flemish staircase,—Miss Winthrop's one contribution to the home that her father had never done adding to,—were white also; and she herself, with deft fingers and beauty-loving eyes, had superintended the whole affair, with Jerriss for an assistant, and Moray as an active agent; while Jack followed her about, trying to get in little bits of personal talk between the Prince's æsthetic rhapsodies and the journalist's running jest.

Finally, Nina, half in, half out of the soft pink gown that she was to wear, bethought her of something,—that last, all-over look which, true hostess that she was, she always liked to bestow upon her rooms and festive boards,—and throwing a bit of lace over her shoulders, she ran across the covered corridor stretching between Louise's rooms and her own.

"Are you finished, dear?" cries she, gayly, as Gerton opens the door to admit her. "I should rather think so!" standing still, and looking with undisguised, frank admiration at the lovely woman—in her sheeny satin and pearls, and the little coif-like pearl-edged hat, the big feather fan, the long silken mittens—who stands with half-deprecating grace before her.

"Lou, you are perfect to-day. Poor Jerriss!" with a mocking little sigh. "I do think," she cries mirthfully, "that he is jealous—very—of Moray. You know I want so much that Moray and you—"

Louise's white face turns rosy red, as she shakes her head, with a little curl on the sweet, short lip.

"*Ma belle!*" she says, with a smile that perhaps women acquire,

who are actresses, amateur or otherwise, "you are awfully late about getting into your gown. I am sure Mrs. Odlorne is pacing the piazza at this moment, lost in a frenzy of apprehension; and as to Jack!"

"I know I'm late. I always am. That's the reason I ran over to see if you—dear, punctual soul that you are!—would not just skip down and take the last peep at the tables and things. Pinard is almost perfect; but still—could you? You can rush up, around by the ball-room—or no, not the ball-room, it is locked; but by the library—and no one can possibly see you."

"Of course I can."

"What a dear! I'll just fly back, then, and finish; and Louise—Louise," calling after her over the staircase, "stop at my door, and tell me if everything is *tout comme il faut*."

"I will."

Miss Peale easily gains the breakfast-room, and even one hurried glance assures her that everything is correct here; as well in the hall, where the leaping flames in the wide fireplace throw dancing shadows on the gypsy tea-kettle that already steams upon the hearth, on its silver tripod, as well as on the copper one that swings upon the crane. She goes out on the piazza, and here, for the first time, her rapid eye takes note of the favors, exquisite frosted silver frames, at each plate, containing— Louise stoops to see whose photo—her own. Instinctively she is filled with a great, pleased gratitude to Nina, and the tears almost cloud her sight as she remembers how much—how very much—this friend has been to her.

She takes up one of the pictures and looks at it, lays it down with a sigh, and reads as she does so the name on the card at its side—"Mr. Moray Stuart."

Quickly, with a swift, fearful, impatient, and yet haughty gesture, she snatches the photo from its place, and, not pausing for further thought, hiding it in the folds of her gown as she goes, Louise flees to her own room, tosses the portrait into a table-drawer, locks it, and drops the key in her pocket.

In another moment she has assured Miss Winthrop that Pinard is quite entirely perfect, and that there is not a leaf or flower lacking or amiss on all the twelve tables.

Mr. Stuart, Miss Peale, Miss Josephine Peck, and Jerriss

Redlon had been placed at one table; Mrs. Rose, Tom Hammond, the little Count, and Ida at another; whilst Mrs. Peck sat, redundantly smiling, opposite Bennie Sommers of *The Rostrum*, and supported by a Miss Aston and the hope of the house of Lovell, at either hand. Nina had taken under her own wing a hopeless Linford girl, giving Jack Van Cortland to her for a vis-à-vis, and herself absorbing, to the best of her ability, an equally hopeless Wadsworth man. Mrs. Odlorne was flanked by a Professor at right and left, and opposite to her sat the noble, sweet, and heroic-looking woman who, a decade or more ago, was the world-famed star of the English-speaking stage.

The whole scene was a fascinating one to the mere lover of the picturesque and the flawless—

For the *gourmet*?

Tiens! De Vervan's small, bead-like orbs took in, with a complete appreciation, the buffet loaded with iced melons, the side-board decked out bravely with his favorite ortolans, his beloved cheese-stuffed partridges—the noble gentleman was born in Bourgogne—pains fourrés, sandwiches, caviare; and the filigrane which hung amid the red-leaved vines on the porch above his noble head, filled with crystal flagons full of the liquid amber, ruby, topaz, of sherry, marsala, chambertin, champagne, and café à la crème, glacé.

His little countenance waxes now pink, then red, at last swarthy, as he discusses Heaven knows what inanity with his beloved, leaving Mrs. Rose and the young amateur actor to a refreshing bout on the respective charms of English and American country life. This entirely elevating theme, it must be acknowledged, being somewhat intersected in Mrs. Rose's mind by the horrible fact that, at the table next to her, Mrs. Drummond-Peck, lost in the lengthy mazes of Sommers's pleasant chat, is drinking her café à la crème with the spoon standing in the cup like a flag of distress!

If Mrs. Drummond-Peck has been instructed and drilled upon this point once by the vigilant Mrs. Roosevelt Rose, she has at least fifty odd times—but without avail. At heated moments, when lured by the savory viands of a social board, and further wooed from the recollection of Mrs. Rose's injunc-

tions by agreeable conversation, Mrs. Drummond-Peck allows the spoon to hold its own.

"Taint no use, Josie," the respectable matron has often replied to the private adjurations of her younger daughter—"Taint no use; my forefinger's always been used to feelin' the spoon alongside of it; and as far as I can see, it's nothing short of a special providence that keeps the cup from fallin' on the floor out of my hand when it ain't there. I can do it when I ain't talking; but the moment I'm in comp'ny and enjoying myself, I must hold it comfortable."

"Oh, mamma!" groans Josephine.

"Well, I'm sure it's a good sight better than droppin' a Sèvres cup that maybe has cost people twenty dollars apiece with the saucer."

"That's so!" exclaims Ida, making an affirmative variation on her pet phrase.

Presently every one was commenting upon, and exclaiming delightedly over, the favors.

"They are just too sweet for anything!" Josephine cries, holding hers at arm's length. "Aren't they, Mr. Redlon?"

"Yes," Jerriss answers, his eyes fastened upon Louise's face.

"Such a beautiful, lovely, sensitive idea, too—don't you think so, Mr. Stuart?"

"Exquisite!" murmurs Moray, with a side-glance at Nina, whose table is near him—"like everything Miss Winthrop does."

"Isn't it a perfect likeness?" cries the engaging girl, looking at her vis-à-vis. "Why, I declare! I me— Why, Mr. Stuart hasn't any favor at all!"

"What!" exclaims Nina, while a shade of annoyed surprise creeps over her face. "I am sure that I placed the correct number myself. However—" The young hostess pauses with a brilliant smile, and a "Won't you help me?" little half-imploring glance at Moray, which Jack cannot fail to see.

She is unwilling to allow the slightest mar upon her festival, and turns to him to assist her well out of it.

Moray looks up, not at Nina, but at Louise, with a glance of the most perfect, and subdued, and tender courtesy.

He says, speaking low, "I need no photograph to make me

remember Miss Peale. Hers is a face, once seen, not soon, if ever, forgotten."

She bows her head.

Nina rattles on with some badinage, quite lost upon the Aston youth, whose soul only flies after a tennis-ball as a usual thing, and a yacht on occasions. In a moment she turns aside, and in a half-whisper, holding a strawberry by its stem toward him—"There is a reward for a good, faithful Prince Charming!"

And his cold eyes start aflame at the light touch and go of her fingers, as they meet his outstretched to take her gift.

Jack pours out a glassful of wine from the nearest flagon, and drinks it down, without knowing its flavor.

"Pour me some tea, please," she says to him, with a pretty, helpless little air, tendering her cup; and forthwith, lifted from the ground of despair, Mr. Van Cortland crosses to the fire, and fills the dainty cup with the fragrant beverage.

"Sugar?" he says, in his rich, low voice, setting the cup down before her.

"Yes, of course."

"One or two?"

"Two."

"And cream?"

"Certainly."

"Much or little?" laughing down with happy eyes into her radiant face.

"Oh—much. There! that will do. Thanks."

And then ten minutes later—

"But you have not tasted your tea."

"Oh," laughing, "you did not suppose that I actually wanted tea, did you? Not really?"

"Why not?" returns he, in a low tone, rising as she does, so following Mrs. Odlorne's lead.

"I only asked for tea because I do not like cross-looking, idle people sitting at my right hand—that is all."

And they both laugh, and look into each other's eyes, seeing Heaven alone knows what, of sweet or bitter.

He watches her, as she moves about with those little airs of imperious grace, all her own, among her guests; a word here, a

smile there—carrying sunlight, it seems to him, all about her wherever she goes.

In that pink frock, with her round, white, half-bare arms, her little pink shoes and stockings, her big hat, with its soft plumes curling over the rings of her bright dark hair—with the splendid pink topazes, that belonged to a Winthrop centuries ago, dangling in sparkling pendants on her throat, her ears, her arms and fingers—ye gods! Jack takes a cooling turn down in the flower-gardens. Miss Aston is beside him, it is true; he faintly realizes that he is holding her fan, or her gloves, or something, while she tells him all about the races yesterday; and how cold it was on the stand; and how glad she is it is so warm to-day; and how she is going in to win the prize at the Tennis Tournament next week; and what a smart gown Miss Lovell has got on; and so on, and on, endlessly, it appears to him—until they turn a sharp corner by the bed of gaudy dahlias, and he sees the rose-colored gown go swishing against the gravel, and its wearer leaning lightly on Moray Stuart's arm, before him, and so out of sight.

"What a damned fellow that Stuart is, anyway! and he must be old enough to be—her father." To be sure, he is not far off forty himself; but then—well, he still is, as yet, only thirty-nine, for a few days at least.

He looked his age—which Prince Charming, as has been related, did not.

Upon Jack Van Cortland's face, with all its strength and latent sweetness, the hall-mark of experience was written as plainly as that of breeding and birth; and, upon the whole, in women's eyes, his years were not his defect; whereas his sublimely assumed indifference perhaps was—or was not, according to the cleverness of the woman who encountered it.

He was—that man, most fascinating, and above all other men in the world, to an exceptional woman, the most charming and satisfying to meet—an American who, born and brought up at home, had spent the years from twenty-two to thirty-five in England, with not infrequent runs across the Channel.

Without being in the least what is called "anglicized," for lack of a more correct expression, he had toned down from the obtuse brusquerie of "native worth" inherent in most of

my countrymen—whether well or ill born matters not very much—into a man who merits that grand and noble prefix of “gentle :” from crown to heel Jack Van Cortland was “gentle,” and a “man.”

At first sight, his height and splendid build impressed one immediately to favor him, because beauty is, after all, its own excuse—if it is in need of one ! His face was rather uncompromising, with its haughty, well cut features and brilliant blue eyes ; but the mouth was beautiful, full-lipped, red, and parting with ready smiles to show white and handsome teeth ; the brow was broad, with a frown always as ready as his smile, and the dark hair about his temples was already tinged with gray. Frown as he might, though, Jack’s dimples—one in his chin, the other in his cheek, absurd reminiscences of his long-gone babyhood—always gave him away—labelled him, as it were, a sweet-tempered, luxury-loving, sensitive, emotional, passionate, and withal strong man ; a man who, no matter what life had been coerced into showing him (through an inordinate craving of all knowledge) of bitter, bad, or blameful, still kept his ideal in his heart, and believed most implicitly in its eventual realization.

“What in the world are we coming down here for ?” exclaims Miss Winthrop, as she and Moray find themselves on the threshold of the upper story of the summer-house—the pretty, rustic double-summer-house, built in the cleft of a side-hill, and giving on a delightful landscape of the valley of the Housatonic, clad this morning in a tender autumnal mist, and ablaze, here and there, with the glories of a growing-old year.

“Because I wanted to be with you for ten minutes out of the sight or sound of—any one.”

She laughs—a regal little laugh, that sounds as if a sceptre lurked not far off in the laughter’s grasp.

“Would it not have been just a trifle more—courteous—if you had first inquired as to my preference in the matter ?”

“It might have been more courteous, but”—A glint of steel gleams in his light eyes and even plays in the semblance of a smile that parts his thin, well-shaped lips.

“But ?” She waits coolly.

“Is there not a time when courtesy goes by the board, and when a man does things because he cannot—dare not—help

doing them—when the supreme power that controls him, beckons him on to a little taste of happiness—a simple quarter of an hour wherein to breathe the air freely ; wherein he can pour out his adoration and worship, uncontaminated by a score or two of maudlin inanities— Oh, child !” cries he, under his breath, “ do not look at me in that way !” He catches at the filmy drape of her gown, and twists it to a rag in his great workaday hand.

“ How do I look at you ?” returns Miss Winthrop, quietly. “ I am merely surprised.”

“ You cannot be ! Surprised at what ?”

“ At your finding in this quiet, pretty Lenox landscape,” motioning with her fan toward the scene spread out before them, “ adequate inspiration for your worship and adoration.”

“ Nina !” The gauzy sash of rose-colored stuff is rifted and torn in two by that unconscious grip.

“ Well ?” with a little short laugh.

“ You are ice !” cries he, in a restrained voice, while his eyes sparkle, and the blood rushes to his white temples in a dark flood.

“ It should make you more cool to be—beside me, then.”

“ Not so,” returns he hotly. “ I believe that my—feeling—for you only unfolds the more—and the more—”

“ Flower-like,” suggests she imperturbably.

“ Yes—if you will,” clenching his strong, even teeth together with admirable self-control.

“ And yet the frost”—turning slow footsteps back toward the gardens and the house, whence come the strains of sweetest music—“ kills the flower—”

“ And ripens the grape,” he adds swiftly.

Miss Winthrop laughs, glancing over her shoulder at him—a merry, meaningless little laugh—as they come upon Louise and Jerriss, and Jack, his tall head devotedly bent above the blue chapeau of the interesting and eminently intelligent Miss Constance Aston.

“ What do you think ?” cries Nina, as they stand for a moment in the garden-path together ; “ Mr. Stuart, here, has just been complaining to me because there are people at my breakfast not

altogether as æsthetically superior as he is—the poor fellow—poor Prince Charming! His immaculate nerves are unstrung.”

“The Pecks, I dare to say!” exclaims Miss Peale.

“Not really,” Jerriss says solemnly. “Ah, my dear fellow, now I regard the Drummond-Pecks in the light of a godsend.”

“Such a lot of money!” Miss Aston chimes in reverentially.

“Well, not exactly that, you know; but there certainly is this consolation in encountering *les nouveaux riches*, they do not embarrass your sympathies—and your facial expression—by a recital of what they and theirs have been, done, and had.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughs Prince Charming, smoothing down with the broad tips of his fingers the unbecoming furrows which mirth ever makes in his handsome face.

“They refrain from parsing that perpetual past tense, and although they do put the present at its full market value always—their ancestry they permit to lie *perdus* in their graves, albeit they themselves are pertinaciously patent!”

“Good! Bravo!” Jack says, watching with amusement the puzzled countenance of Miss Aston, whom at this moment he is surreptitiously planning to quit, in favor of his hostess.

“The relief and contrast are not undesirable,” Stuart remarks.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Winthrop,” Van Cortland exclaims, crossing to her side in such deft fashion as that Moray, perforce, must find himself next to Constance; “you have come to grief with this scarf arrangement, or whatever it may be called”—on one knee, and holding up the shreds of Moray Stuart’s uneasy, passionate touch for the pink gown’s inspection.

“Take grief off of me then,” smiles she, as Prince Charming and his blue-bonneted companion saunter slowly up the lawn, followed by Jerriss and Louise.

“Would to high heaven I had the right, now and ever!” he says, dropping the grief in hand with alacrity, and looking up at her. “Would you just come down yonder, you know, by the wood-path, for a blessed little quarter of an hour? If you only knew how I have been pursuing this pink frock all day.”

“And have you found the pins?” inquires Miss Winthrop, relevantly.

"What pins? Oh yes, to be sure, of course! Where are they? Do you want to really take it off, eh?"

"Certainly!"

"But—it's rather—well, intractable, don't you know; your maid hadn't me in mind when she was fastening it, evidently."

"Tear it."

"Oh—"

"Very bad form, I know as well as you; but won't you just do as I say?" impatiently.

"Won't I? Rather! There!" The pink gauze gives like a thread, as he snaps it from the fastening at her waist.

"I'll do without it, won't I?" she asks, recollecting for the first time that a dismantled toilette is not quite the thing.

"Do! I should say so! I should not miss this streamer at all." Mr. Van Cortland's tone and air would carry the conviction to any doubting mind that, certainly, if he did not call for the lost sash, no one else possibly could. "By-the-way, what shall I do with it?"

"Throw it down—there! anywhere—that will answer. And you are sure that"—hesitating, as she stands before him, with anxious questioning mien—"that I will really do?"

"My darling!" Jack says, under his breath, while the hand he stretches out toward her shoulder trembles. "'Do!' why, you are the loveliest woman—and would be in a—in short—in anything that the sun ever shone upon."

"Don't, don't!" she whispers, shrinking away from him—"I do not—"

And then Josephine, in splendid raiment, dawns in sight, leading the tennis-playing Lovell, and followed by Ida and her somewhat somnolent little nobleman.

"Oh, Miss Winthrop!" Josephine calls.

Jack bites in his thick brown mustache, and assumes an air of hastily improvised conventional sobriety.

"Yes?" Nina says.

"Miss Peale says she will recite for us if you wish it—Miss Winthrop," cries Josie. "Mr. Redlon says he thinks that her manager would not object, for just this once—and of course you do wish it, don't you?"

"Indeed, Miss Josephine, I had planned it—after a fashion—feeling sure that Miss Peale would not refuse me."

"She is so lovely!" cries the younger Miss Drummond-Peck, "don't you think so?" turning brisk brown eyes up to Moray Stuart.

"Very, very indeed."

"Lovely!" murmurs Ida.

"*Charmante, adorable!*" mutters the count; "and Mademoiselle will make much money also," adds the Sire de Vervan, with that keen but not unusual aptitude for a pecuniary aspect which many, if not all, foreigners exhibit.

"Precisely," replies Prince Charming.

"The artists are almost through with the programme, Miss Winthrop—and the music you have given us has just been too lovely for anything—Hasselbrink is such a love, isn't he, Mr. Van Cortland?"

"I am sure of it," Jack coincides, with frowning amiability, as they all proceed to the house.

The last notes of Walker's voice in the superb *Three Grenadiers* have gained him the plaudits to which he is well used, and Bagbey is at the piano, winning from the cold white keys such warmth of splendid melody as only an artist's true touch can.

Click! goes the key in the ball-room door-lock; the portières are swung back on their rods, and a flood of softest candlelight greets the guests at Winhurst that morning, as they are ushered in by Jack, and Moray, and Jerriss, whom Nina has let into her secret, and constituted her field-marshal for the little nonce.

The pianist's last, faltering, sweet bars lapse into a silence. Mrs. Rose, amiably fenced by Mrs. Drummond-Peck, is taking a few hasty notes of the scene, for her Sunday letter, on one of the scented pads that always lie masked in those endless velvet bags that Mrs. Rose inevitably carries.

Jerriss Redlon stands leaning, in the far background, beside Bennie Sommers, whose white hair contrasts oddly with his ruddy, youngish face; the stately old lady whom our grandfathers toasted in the good days of the old Park Theatre sits on a cushioned arm-chair, wheeled in for her express benefit. Nina is half-shrouded in the curtains between the silver can-

delabra; Moray moves near her, and Jack remains immovable, with his hungering eyes fastened, almost wistfully, upon her brilliant, eager face.

There came a hush—a pause for only a moment; and then the white silken curtains on the little orchestra balcony, opposite the group, parted slowly, and the fairest *Juliet* that sun ever rose or set upon stood before them.

Louise—her hat laid aside, her short, soft golden curls filleted with strings of pearls; the very halo of newly-born love shining like an aureole about her bright young head; her white bosom throbbing under the filmy lace and jewels; her two hands clasped, and all, from head to foot, as white as moonlight and as newly fallen snow—breathed out, between sweetest sighs, the old, old words we know so well.

Tom Hammond was the *Romeo*, reading his lines with a fire and abandon that did him great credit, and earned for him considerably more than Miss Josephine's usual amount of generous enthusiasm.

But Miss Peale's *Juliet*!

There was such a rapturous pause after her exit, as the curtains fell together again, as made her tremble where she stood up yonder, alone—such a storm of applause after, as made the blood rush burningly to her pallid face.

When she came down among them, Mrs. Odlorne at one side, Nina at the other, the stately star—the *Juliet* of the old school—rose and came toward the slight girl, and putting her arms about her, said,

“My dear, in my youth the public crowned me a queen; but when they see you, they will greet you as an empress is greeted. You have genius; you are beautiful; and”—a little sadly—“you are young.”

“Well?” Jerriss says, with a smile, to Mrs. Rose.

“Well, indeed,” she says; “but I suppose she will not even thank me for lauding her to the skies in my next letter, eh?” tentatively.

“Do not do it, then,” he says—and she does not.

“Is she not wonderful—my Louise?” Nina exclaims to Moray, bending above her with an ice.

"No woman is wonderful to me," he answers swiftly and with subtle emphasis, "but one—you."

"Get me another ice," she says. "I am so warm."

"Heaven be praised!" and away he goes in search of it.

"What do you think Bennie Sommers says about her?" looking up at Jack, who still stands leaning at the high back of her chair.

"I don't know," courteously. "What?"

"You are distraught—not interested."

"I beg your pardon—I am interested in anything that interests you."

"He says that she is 'the divine new Juliet, and that the tinct of girlish mirth and raillery that she gives the Capulet, will enthrone her anew in every lover's heart, and every critic's head.' Isn't he clever?"

"Immensely."

"I do not like bored people."

"Do not let me be bored any longer, then, Indeed," laughing, "it is quite too bad of you not to endeavor—to strive, in short—to do as I want you to. I am a guest, and therefore to be—humored."

"Well?" lifting eyes full of languorous light to his.

"Oh, come out—out, down yonder in the garden, somewhere—where we were a while ago."

"Well," dreamily, and rising.

They easily divide from the animated groups in the ball-room and the piazza.

They walk down among the flowers together, and in silence.

They are well-nigh at the edge of the strip of woodland near the summer-house, when they both see Moray Stuart; he stoops and picks up something from the garden-bed; it is a ragged, torn, pink, gauzy scarf: he presses it to his face with both his hands, with a fierce and uncontrollable emotion, and then folds it and places it in his pocket.

Jack Van Cortland looks at the girl beside him; she is very pale.

"What time is it, please?"

"Half after three," glancing at his watch.

"So late! The people will be leaving now; we must go back to the house."

"Must we?"

"Yes."

"You are tired?"

"A little."

"Will you take my arm?"

"Yes," looking up with half-timid half-grateful eyes, as he draws the small ungloved hand, with its splendor of rings safely within the fold of his arm.

CHAPTER NINTH.

MRS. ODLORNE'S whim of occupying the box-seat on Mr. Van Cortland's drag had long since been gratified—and was about to be again, on a certain drive, planned some time back, to Williamstown, the seat of Mr. Redlon's alma mater.

There cannot be imagined a much more disgusted man than Jack Van Cortland on this occasion, as, instead of Nina, he ruefully—but with cheerful-appearing smiles—assisted the lively little widow to mount the ladder and take her place at his left hand; whilst her niece and Moray Stuart, with his calm, invincible, possessive air, had the back seat, and Louise and Jer-riss the one between.

The morning was a glorious one; there had been frost during the night, and now, at nine o'clock, the hollows were misty with the melted hoar, and all the clefts full of that smoky vapor that lures every pungent autumnal odor from root and leaf and herb, and makes the whole air vivid, exhilarating, and entrancing.

"What a superb day!" murmurs Mrs. Odlorne, with a sentimental sigh, as she settles the jewelled pins of her bonnet-bow.

"Glorious!" Jack assents, with a reckless, bad-mannered, backward glance toward the occupants of the third seat.

"What a superb driver you are, Mr. Van Cortland!" in a romantic semitone.

He laughs—the nervous, risible excitement of a man of his calibre, suffering under the infliction of personal compliment from a feminine source.

“In fact,” pursuing the half-voice to a deeper depth, “you do everything well—”

“Except sleep,” he says, in a high, cheerful key.

“How? What?”

“I can’t tell how it is, but I am horribly off my sleep these last few nights. I thought perhaps you, Mrs. Odlorne, could tell me of something to take—don’t you know—or—”

“Certainly. I have *coffea cruda* in my satchel, and I will give you a dose to-night. Perhaps Lenox air doesn’t agree with you—or—you may be—worried”—a falling inflection—“about something—some one.”

“I used to be, far and away, the best sleeper imaginable; but”—with a second disregard of the rules of courtesy, and a vicious flick on the gray wheelers’ ears, as he catches sight of Moray’s picturesque head bent low beside Nina’s face—“I don’t know how it is—I beg your pardon!”

“I only said,” sighed Mistress Drusilla, “that I could sympathize with you.”

“You are awfully good, I am sure.”

“Prince Charming says I am always sympathetic; but then he has known me so much longer than—you have!”

Mrs. Odlorne has a distinct theory, always reduced to sharp practice, that an infusion of contrast is generally effective in dealing with the masculine sex.

“To be sure; and yet, is it not possible,” says he, going off on his own private little mental railway to Mrs. Odlorne’s niece, “that the person who has known one only a comparatively short time should know one, after all, the best?”

“Indeed, indeed it is!” clasping her plump little gloved hands over the carved handle of her parasol.

“I think so!” he says, staring off into the distance, which is filled for him with no one knows what vision of divine comprehension.

“You do!” cries the little relict, in an ecstatic undertone.

“Oh yes!”—while, almost on his arm, he feels again the pres-

sure of those small fingers, as he felt them on the day of the breakfast-party.

"I was sure of it!" cries she; "sure that you," with a pathetic, pleased little emphasis, "could and would understand me as—perhaps no other human being could!"

"By all means," pulling himself together with a quite visible effort, and bending upon Miss Winthrop's aunt one of those bewildering smiles which may mean anything or nothing, as the mood of the beholder sees fit to interpret them.

"Ah," shaking her head coquettishly, "Mr. Van Cortland, I don't know what I am to do with you!" Drusilla's translation of the smile has been eminently satisfactory to herself, evidently.

"Anything you please!" says he. Then, a pause, which was not filled by further remark from him, as it should have been—a pause delicious to Mistress Drusilla, and finally broken by the long, sweet, mellow wind of the horn, as they neared Pittsfield.

"By the way, Mrs. Odlorne, you have known Stuart a long time back, you say?"

"Years—years. He has known Nina all her life—has held the dear child on his knee many a time"—cheerfully—"when he was a young fellow. Of course that was before my day—at least, I mean, before my day as a young lady."

"I see," he says, with a deepening frown.

"Awfully gone on Miss Peale, don't you think so?" Jack remarks briskly, with that strange spirit of perversion which causes some natures to seek to hear a hateful fact bluntly put into words that are certain to scorch.

"Oh no!" exclaims Mrs. Odlorne, with an inflection akin to horror. "Miss Peale is not at all his style—not at all—"

"Possible?"

"Dear me! no. Poor Moray!"—looking down and flecking a speck of dust from her sleeve—"poor Moray!" It is astonishing how some women can condense (wilfully) an entire novelette, with themselves for the reluctant heroine, in a two-worded exclamation such as the above.

Jack looks down at his companion with undisguised curiosity.

"Ah, well!" dismissing "poor Moray's" sad episode with a little sweet sigh. "Louise? Oh no! Jerriss is her especial devotee!"

"Indeed!" with all the amazement that this information might have caused him had he not been perfectly aware of the state of the case—and then, a little bitter wonder as to why *her* name did not come into the conversation.

He had not long to wait for it.

"I have fancied—have not you? you are so clear about everything!—that our Prince Charming was rather—taken with Nina—my niece; she has always been thought very like me!"

"Really!"

"When I was her age—"

"To be sure—I—of course."

"Then you don't think Moray admires her—in that way?"

"Ah, Mrs. Odlorne, it takes a bright woman to answer such questions; a stupid fellow like me, you know, wouldn't know that sort of thing unless it were labelled."

"I am sure of it," Drusilla remarks meditatively. "I know the—the signs."

"Who better?" returns he, gallantly, as he wonders if he dare drive any faster, and so bring the tête-à-tête on the back seat to an end sooner than he can at this pace.

"Oh—and I think—I think that Nina is very fond of him."

"Oh, do you, now?"

The chestnut leaders jump under the sting of an unmerited lash, and a little startled exclamation comes to him from behind. He pulls up suddenly.

"I beg your pardon," turning squarely about, "Miss Winthrop; did I alarm you?"

"Not at all."

"I assure you, I—"

"Not at all, I say; you know I am fearless about horses—"

"And men," murmurs the one at her side, in a low tone.

"And I adore fast driving!" clearly spoken.

"Shall we go faster, then?"

"As fast as you like!" calls she gayly, answering his smile with another, to the full as sweet.

And so, with a plunge, and a long, echoing tra-la-la-la from the guard's horn, the coach spins on, Greylock rises away to the

north, before them, and the two valleys stretch peacefully at its base, the bright fleck of the winding rivers, the Hoosac and the Housatonic, dividing the level meadows, as their waters run dimpling through the woodlands and dancing under the bridges.

The foliage is superb: masses of yellow where the sugar-maples' green has turned to gold beneath the touch of the great alchemist; the bronzed branches of the oaks growing up straight beside the supple, dark greens of the firs and pines; and the delicate sprays of the sumac, brilliant in scarlet against the gray of the great rocks.

"Er—by the way, what were we speaking of, Mrs. Odlorne?" Jack inquires, in a puzzled tone of well-feigned indecision.

"Of?—oh yes!—of Nina's being fond of Moray Stuart."

"To be sure!" with happy recollective emphasis. "By the way, should you like—the idea?"

"Oh, decidedly! How could any one object to Moray?" pausing, as if the mere hint of such heresy required a chance, and silence, to explode in.

"Quite so," he returns heartily.

"I think he is perfectly adapted to fulfil all the needs of any woman."

"Yes."

"Handsome, clever, cultivated, and so refined."

He inclines his head. He has heard enough. The reins tighten over his horses' necks, and conversation lags into a running commentary on the scenery.

They bowl past Pontoosuc Lake, and have a salute from the puffing little steamer, as it plies between the upper and lower wharves. They strike amazement and admiration to the hearts of the children in the Lanesborough school-yard, as the guard greets them with a prolonged blast, and Jack pitches them a handful of pennies.

Near South Williamstown they meet a train of charcoal-carts, and the straining horses stand aside to let them pass, and the grimy drivers turn away their faces, not curious of the people they meet. But when Jack pulls in, and tosses them a half-dozen cigars with a pleasant "Thank you, my men," he does not see their quick, glad surprise, for the depth of his gratitude and

delight, as he catches the pleased flush on her face, and the swift interchange of her appreciative glance with his.

He turns into the river-road, and thus enters Williamstown Street from the Gymnasium Corner, instead of from above, by South Street.

The Mansion House is closed, under which aspect of barred doors and shuttered windows it is even more uninviting than in summer; but the old-fashioned Kellogg is open, and here the coach comes to a stop.

Before Moray Stuart has gotten out of his seat, with his encumbrance of wrappings and robes, Jack has swung himself from his, and has the good fortune to lend his hand in assisting Miss Winthrop to descend.

With graceful tact the Prince crosses to the little widow, and plays the amiable as well—in partnership with Jerriss—to Louise.

"Don't distress yourself, Stuart; James will see to all those traps," Mr. Van Cortland says, noting the other man's anxious eye within the coach.

"Is his name James?" Mrs. Odlorne queries. "You always have a James, don't you?"

"Always," he responds, with a laugh. "That is a *sine qua non*. When I engage a groom I invariably stipulate that he shall answer to James. It is a lackey's name universal, it seems to me, and, 'pon my soul, don't you know, I couldn't call one anything else."

"James, that small brown satchel, if you please." Mr. Stuart receives it from the man's hand with an expression of devout relief, and carries it with care into the house.

"I say, Stuart," Jerriss exclaims, "what have you in there? It must be crown jewels at the least."

"Something infinitely more precious," Nina says, under her breath, as Jack and Jerriss stand beside her, before the blazing wood-fire that lights up the dingy little inn parlors into a semblance of comfort and cheer.

"What?" Van Cortland asks.

"His complexion, I suspect!"

They all three look at each other, and then laugh merrily

—about?—the rickety chairs, and the queer little mantel-shelf, and whatever else besides!

And Jack, with such a happy light shining in his eyes, looks down at her, and says in a little, tender whisper,

“Are you very tired? Did I drive too fast?”

“Not a bit. Not tired, but—”

“Hungry?”

“Awfully!”

“How jolly!”

And they laugh again—for what, they could neither of them very accurately define.

And then they go up to the rooms that have been engaged by telegraph a week ago, and Redlon manages to say to Louise, between the chat and merriment, as Mrs. Odlorne distributes them in Numbers Two, Three, Five, Eight, Ten, and Eleven,

“Shall you be too weary to take a little bit of a walk after dinner?”

And she answers softly, “No.”

It is safe to say that a merrier sextette never sat down in the dining-room of the old Kellogg House than the little party at the table by the door, matronized by Mrs. Drusilla Odlorne. The students had nearly all been in at the punctual hour of one, and consequently the room was given over exclusively to the Lenox people, by two.

Moray was full of grace and appreciation and apt anecdote, at the widow's left; Jack at her right, with Nina beside him; and opposite, Louise and Jerriss.

“It is not your first dinner in this *salle à manger*, Redlon, is it?” Prince Charming asks, after his soup.

“By no means. Many and many a rattling good time have I had, sitting at that middle table yonder by the south windows.”

Louise's eyes follow his.

“Well,” Drusilla remarks briskly, “I wish to know what the programme is to be after dinner. I suppose we are, of course, to go over the college buildings.”

“That would certainly be in order,” Jack responds.

“With Mr. Redlon for cicerone, naturally,” Miss Peale exclaims.

“Undoubtedly.” The Prince bends upon her a coinciding

little glance, as he fills her glass with the Bordeaux which the faithful James has brought safely from Lenox in one of his hampers. "Here's success to *The Brazilian*," cries he, raising his goblet amid a little storm of "Hears!"—"and fame to its author, the cleverest graduate of old 'Williams.'"

The crystals clink, and are jingling still as the journalist says, in a steady voice:

"And here is to Miss Louise Peale, the heroine of *The Brazilian*!"

Amid the mirth and vivas and general hilarity that this sentiment evokes, it is scarcely noted by any one—save, perchance, the deft New England "young lady," who is at great pains to remedy the mishap with sundry fresh napkins—that Moray Stuart's glass tips awkwardly over, its owner thereby being prevented from drinking to the toast, as he would no doubt have been only too happy to do.

"Come, Van Cortland, give us your toast!" cries he, recovering from his voluble, low-voiced thanks to the Hebe.

"Miss Winthrop of Winhurst," Jack says, in a voice as steady as Redlon's, but pitched in a lower key.

"With all my heart!" Mr. Stuart empties his glass.

"And now, Mrs. Odlorne," Jerriss exclaims, "*place aux dames*!"

"The men, Heaven bless them!" cries the little widow, growing rubicund with pleasurable emotion.

And so on, and much more, until the simple courses thoroughly discussed, they saunter out into the beautiful, broad "street" that is the splendid charm of the old collegiate town.

They peep in at the Cropseys and Harts in Goodrich Hall; they have a catching glimpse of some senior's charmingly fitted up suite in East College; they are weighed in the gymnasium, and as the silvery chime rings out the quarter from the open tower, they disdain Morgan Hall, and turn in through the porch of the chapel, and seat themselves in two or three of the pews.

"They've a very good organ yonder," Jerriss says.

"Have they?" cries Nina, interestedly.

"Yes. Won't you try it, Nina?" Louise urges.

"Oh no," flushing a bit, as Jack looks quickly at her.

"Why not?" he says gently.

"Yes, why not, Miss Nina?" Moray echoes, rising. "Mrs. Odlorne has just been telling me that you are taking organ-lessons."

"Is that the latest fad?" Jerriss laughs.

"I am taking lessons," she says quietly. "I go to Stockbridge twice a week, and have them in St. Paul's."

"Do you really?" Jack asks.

"To be sure."

"Well," Mr. Redlon sighs resignedly, "if you must, Miss Winthrop, cause yourself to be instructed in the beating of some helpless instrument, better this one than—the piano!"

"Amen!" Moray remarks fervently.

"I agree with you," Nina smiles softly. "The organ, it seems to me, may echo in the courts of heaven; the violin wail to waiting souls in purgatory; but the piano! resound never in either."

"Although it may—somewhere else," murmurs Redlon, facetiously. "Come, Jack," he adds, "play for us, won't you?"

"Shall I?" Van Cortland asks, looking down into Miss Winthrop's face.

She nods her head with a smile, and he goes up the aisle.

Louise sits down on the chancel step, her sweet face in her palm, and listens; whilst Jerriss stands by Jack—always, however, looking at her. Prince Charming assumes a poetic expression as he leans from the seat back of Miss Winthrop, and Drusilla, beside him, casts a rapt and heavenward eye.

He plays for them; not anything in the least classical or solemn or even stately, but the waltzes of Strauss, that never can sound as entrancingly and bewitchingly as they do when given on the organ.

Jack must be in a mad mood, for the fire and dash of his playing lend even a new rhythm of voluptuous meaning to the dance-music he plays. To Nina it says something of sweet and sad—that exquisite, unspeakable melancholy that only youth and passion can divine.

"There," he cries, breaking off in the midst of the "Wine, Women, and Song," "I can't play another note!" and stopping a moment for Nina, he and she saunter out together—with Mrs. Odlorne and her Prince in close pursuit—until they have gone

down "Consumption Hill," and passed the turn to the station, and lingered along as far as the narrow lane that leads to the boat-house and the gleaming river.

Jerriss and Miss Peale had left the others at the chapel-door, and gone up Main Street as far as Mather's corner "store." They went a few paces beyond, past the tiny Episcopal church, and then he led across the road, and through the break in the hedge, to the path beneath the pines, and on until they were in Mission Park.

"Can't we sit down here for just a moment?" he pleads, as he parts the low-growing branches to show her the bench within the shadow, this side of the hideous monument.

"If you like," she answers gently.

"There! Let me put this wrap at your back: that is better, is it not? Ah," looking about him with a happy sigh, "you don't know how many times I have come here and read Greek in the old days."

"Tell me about them," she says, turning more fully to him as he sits beside her. The motion is but a trifling one, yet it would seem in some faint fashion to convey the idea that the young actress—for the fleeting moment—was casting from her the calmness of a reserve that was habitual; as if she were bidding, not farewell, but *au revoir* to a tradition of her past, and holding out helpless, imploring hands to a sweeter future.

And Jerriss rehearses for her benefit many of the escapades, the struggles, and the merry-makings of his college days.

"It was not all play for you, was it?" she presently asks, in a tender little voice.

"Not quite," with a small laugh. "But I am very content to have had all the rubs I have had, since my past has brought me to such a—present." He looks wistfully over his glasses at her, but the white lids are lowered, and the pale face is even a shade whiter than its wont.

He rises, and takes a few impatient strides before her.

She rises too, turning her face toward the path.

"Oh, do not! please! Can't we stay here just a little while longer?" He is at her side in a moment, laying a restraining hand so reverently on her arm. "Can't we?"

"Well—I suppose so; it is a charming spot, certainly. I do not wonder that the missionaries chose it for their rendezvous."

She is sitting once more, and he leans over the back of the seat.

"Louise—my Louise!" whispers the young man recklessly, as he strokes the smooth plush of her wrap with nervous, unconscious fingers.

She raises her eyes and looks at him.

"If—if you knew how inexpressibly dear you were to me—you would—perhaps give me a little hope."

"'Hope,'" she echoes brokenly, pressing her hands to her eyes as if to shut out some dreaded, haunting vision—"hope of what?"

"Your love. Oh!" he says, laying his two arms about her shoulders, "I love you; I ask you to be my wife. No, no; I want no answer now. I would have you put me to the proof—any test you will—and then— But meantime, I will be so patient. I will wait, my dear one, as long as you say—Louise—"

She does not shrink away from his touch; she is as quiet as a tired child might be in her place, and slowly her fair head sinks, until her cheek rests softly upon his arm.

"I will be so patient!" he whispers again. "And you don't think that I am such a very bad, unlovable fellow, after all, do you?"

"Bad! unlovable! you?" she moans shiveringly, and with the quiver of tears in her voice—"oh no, no!"

"What is it? Louise—my own! Tell me?" He is beside her now, and has drawn her within the clasp of his eager arms. "Is it—can it be that you love me a little—already?"

The actress raises her head; she places her two trembling hands on his shoulders; she looks in his face; she bends nearer to him; her pink, pretty lips are almost touching his—

"Oh God!" cries she, with a shudder, as she springs back, and up, and away from him.

He is almost too stunned to rise and follow her, as she paces up and down in the narrow little clearing; but at last, timidly, he does, and says,

"Louise!"

"Yes, Mr. Redlon," very quietly.

"Will you answer me one question, yes or no?"

"I—I will try to."

"Do you love me?"

"I ought—I—I cannot," she gasps, between the sobs that choke her utterance.

"Is—is there any one else?" harshly.

"You mean, do I care for any other man?"

"That is just what I mean."

"No," fervently.

"Then," he says, with a degree of composure, "I shall not—I will not despair of winning you."

She puts out a little hand toward him, and into her voice there creeps some of the hysterical, emotional quality that shall bring tears to the eyes of women who sit in the parquette seats at the matinées.

"Let us be friends."

"Always," he says; "and always, too, your lover."

"No, no. Listen: don't you know that in a woman's heart there is no room for two masters?"

"I hope not," devoutly.

"I cannot serve my art," she goes on, unheeding his interruption, "and—another—"

"Let your art go to the winds, then!" cries he. "What do I care for your art? It is you, you, that I want."

"I cannot," she retorts shortly. "Believe that my whole soul is wrapped up in the simple fact, of whether I shall make a success as *Dolores* or no."

"I wish I had never written the accursed play!"

"Do not say that," she exclaims sadly. "I would rather help to make your success than any other man's in the world!"

"Why?" His quick, practical mind notes the admission on the spot.

"Because—" She hesitates, snatches her hand from his, turns away, runs out into the path, laughing—that pulseless, mirthless laugh that Regnier vowed was fuller of desolation than any other actress's sobs he had ever had the pleasure of pronouncing upon or inculcating.

He follows her mechanically.

An hour later they all have their tea together, and they are all as full of chat and badinage as if—well, as if the world had

never known a woe, and Adam never weakly taken the fruit that was offered to him so many years ago.

In the morning the men get horses at the livery-stable, and brush up their spirits by a ride to North Adams, returning for dinner; and after, as the day is very cold for the season, the whole party groups about the fireplace, turning over the newspapers in an uninterested fashion.

Louise is apparently rather more absorbed in a novel.

"Oh!" exclaims Mrs. Odlorne, "why can we not stop a few days here? it is such a lovely place."

"We can," responds the Prince, amiably.

"You forget the Astons' dance to-night, auntie."

"And the Moores' musicale to-morrow, my dear Mrs. Odlorne," Jack supplements cheerfully.

To be plain, Mr. Van Cortland is impatient to set forth on the return-trip; for he has so cleverly managed affairs in general as that the little widow's heart is firmly set upon the society of Mr. Stuart on the homeward drive, and that he is assured Miss Winthrop will not frown upon the box-seat for the journey back to Winhurst.

"True," assents Drusilla, toasting her feet, *bien chaussées*, before the blazing logs. "Well,"—with a suppressed yawn, as she picks up a paper-covered volume from the table,—“Louise, my dear, what are you reading that makes you oblivious of us all?”

"A novel—*The Whole Truth*," she replies, not raising her eyes from the page.

"Is it good?"

"Awfully!" Jack exclaims. "I read it after I went to bed last night."

"What is it about?" queries Drusilla.

"A woman who loved and married a man, deceiving him with regard to her past," Miss Peale answers, turning a leaf.

"Was it a success, may I ask?" Prince Charming inquires, with a smile of polite cynicism.

"An utter failure," Louise replies.

"As it deserved to be," Redlon remarks succinctly.

Louise raises her lids slowly and looks at him; a burning flush spreads over her delicate face, and then, resuming her book, she seems once again absorbed in its pages.

"Have you read it, Jerriss?" Jack asks.

"Yes."

"Clever?"

"Yes; the author should have elaborated the characters rather more intimately, and called it *A Daughter of Lies*, instead of *The Whole Truth*, and it would have run through twenty more editions than it has."

"Very likely," the Prince assents; "the average public has more affinity with the false than the true, more's the pity."

And presently the men saunter out for cigars, and Mrs. Odlorne bustles about the light luggage, and James trips up and down with it, and the coach is at the door, and Jack knows finally that Nina is safely beside him as, the horn echoing mellowly among the hills, they bowl out of Williamstown.

Truth to tell, at this auspicious moment, Mr. Van Cortland is not very positively aware of anything, save this one fact of his nearness to one of his guests; although, in reality, the quartette are comfortably seated, two of them, at least, to their entire satisfaction—a very fair proportion considering they are but four—and these two happen to be, the journalist and the chaperone.

They pass through Pittsfield after sundown; and as the gray clouds that have been gathering all day long spread and reach now across the entire sky, it is, to some ways of thinking, but a cheerless stretch that remains to be gotten over.

To Mr. Van Cortland's perverted taste, however, the gathering gloom appears in the light of a godsend, as he feels that, aided by this friendly shade, he can look down into Miss Winthrop's face almost, if not quite, as often as he would like to.

It grows colder, too, with a keen, raw, north-east wind, which elicits from Mrs. Odlorne prolonged complaints, and from the Prince sundry adjurations to drive faster.

"Fast as I can, my dear boy!" calls back Mr. Van Cortland, blithely. "Fact of it is, these beasts of mine seem to be uncommonly done out with yesterday's pull. I verily believe," he adds, with a fresh gleam of intelligence on the subject—"I verily believe that the poor brutes have been starved the past twenty-four hours."

"Livery-stables are so unreliable!" wails Drusilla.

"Yes, indeed!" exclaims Louise, as Jerriss folds another rug about her feet.

"To tell the truth," Mr. Van Cortland murmurs confidentially to Nina, "I can scarcely hold my wheelers in! I can't imagine what James and Dennison have been feeding them!" He laughs down at her.

"You very bad boy! keeping me out here in this nasty cold breeze, too!"

"Are you cold?" anxiously, and giving the leaders and wheelers both their head, much to the satisfaction of the third seat.

"Let me put this cloak around you. There—how is that?"

"Better."

"Are you cold now?"

"Not very."

"You don't look cold," checking the speed of his steeds with a steady hand.

"You can't see whether I look cold or not," returns Miss Winthrop. "It is by far too dark."

"I can see your eyes shining like two stars lost out of heaven; they do not look cold."

"Why do you want to tease poor dear auntie and the Prince by driving so slowly?" murmurs she, reprimandingly.

"Why?" echoes Jack. "Do you wish me to tell you the reason?"

"Of course," innocently. "Why not?"

"Because, then"—he lays his left hand with a sudden swiftness over the little fingers that are warm beneath the rug—"I have you here beside me, close to me, and it gives me intense happiness; and it will come to an end soon enough, Heaven knows! without my speeding it."

She attempts to take her hand from him.

"Oh, do not!" whispers he, desperately. "My darling!" looking into her's with eyes warmly blue with impassioned yearning.

Tra-la-la-la-la! resounds the horn—and here are the open gates of Winhurst; yonder shine the lights from the windows, full of welcome; and there is just barely time to dine and make one's toilette for Mrs. Aston's dance.

CHAPTER TENTH.

THE ball went off much as half-a-dozen others had gone off during the season, giving no end of satisfaction to most people, and causing the Messrs. Van Cortland and Redlon considerable displeasure and an unlimited quantity of reprehensible language.

Nina only gave Jack one miserable little dance, and she bestowed, or permitted Moray Stuart to appropriate, five unto himself; Louise decided not to dance at all, and spent a very appreciable part of her evening in the conservatory with a German baron, for whom she seemed to experience a sudden sympathy. However, barring these trifles, Mrs. Aston's ball was a success—one, nevertheless, that Mrs. Odorne had already vowed in her secret soul should, before long, be entirely eclipsed by an affair of the same nature at Winhurst. Drusilla fancied that, charming as she proved in every-day habiliments, the *grande tenue* would be apt to provoke a more positive admiration than Prince Charming, or Jerriss, or Jack—it mattered little which—had as yet vouchsafed to her.

When Nina was approached upon the subject, it was found to fall in precisely with her own ideas; and after a half-hour's chat, the Winhurst ball was only a matter of a fortnight in accomplishment. In fact, Miss Winthrop threw heart and soul into the project, and set the date so as to be just four days before Louise's début at the Criterion, for which, of course, they were all going to town.

Mrs. Moore's musicale was only one of a dozen things of the kind that now followed each other in rapid succession, sandwiched between *déjeuners à la fourchette*, dinners innumerable, dances, luncheons, teas, and the like. Then came in, too, the pretty christening of the last Linford baby—a pink morsel swathed in point lace, and who, notwithstanding this fact, sent forth a stout wail of disapproval of the aqueous part of the rite. And then, between Mrs. Lovell's reception for the heir to a dukedom, and the Misses Fielding's cotillon for their pretty niece, there came in the tub parade,

The traps were all, or nearly all, in line, when Jack, who was one of the judges, stood in a club-house window, wondering where Nina could be.

It was also the day of the final yacht-race for the *America's* cup, and lo and behold! here came Miss Drummond-Peck, clad in a striking gown of violently Scottish plaid, her thoroughbred's ears decked with rosettes to match, and the tiger as well, whilst a bunch of thistles was neatly tied to her jewelled whip-handle.

The little Count, in a costume which put *le sport* tremendously *en évidence*, sat erectly beside his betrothed, and smiled cheerfully as well as with vanity at the plaudits which the equipage and its occupants at once elicited.

"By Jove!" Van Cortland says, smiling, "I never saw the Drummond-Peck look half so well in my life!"

"Not bad!" assents Jerriss, lazily.

"I say, though—all that plaid, etc."

"Oh," laughs the journalist, "don't you suppose Mrs. Rose is too clever, by half, to permit an occasion like this to go by without showing up the Scotch connection in proper form?"

"By Jove!" exclaims Jack, safely, craning his handsome head to wonder anew where Nina can be; he has not seen her since breakfast, but knows full well that her heart is set that Poppet and Peacock, and the brown tub and harness, shall win the day.

"To be sure; remarkably acute old party. She suggested and ordered the gown from Redfern, as soon as the affair came on the tapis; I knew it, but was sworn to secrecy—no end of a clever stroke, don't you see? I think she has the ducal heir in her mind's eye for Josephine."

"Really—ah!" Mr. Van Cortland exclaims.

"It's a Scotch peerage, you know."

"There she is!" cries Jack, with slight irrelevance; adding under his breath, "God bless her!"

The ponies come spinning at break-neck speed down the hill from Winhurst, around the corner sharply, and with a reckless, hair-breadth dash; Nina falls into line just in front of Miss Drummond-Peck's Caledonian equipage, and she is greeted with a storm of welcome, as is quite natural.

The whole thing partook slightly of a theatrical aspect to the uninitiated observer, but the facts of the matter were that Miss Winthrop had been, up to the present moment, as ignorant of Ida's tribute to her relative, Drummond of Knock-Erran, as Miss Drummond-Peck had been of Miss Winthrop's patriotic little compliment to the American boat.

When Poppet and Peacock, laying back their ears in silent dislike for the golden-rod that frilled their pretty heads, came scampering into Lenox, in front of the brown cart full of yellow blossoms, with the four dogs sitting in the rumble, each with a ribbon tied about his neck, with *Volunteer* printed on it in gilt; when Jack Van Cortland beheld Nina, reins and whip in her firm little right hand,—no bobbing arms and stooping shoulders,—the *Volunteer* ribbon floating from the russet handle of her whip,—Nina in her little dark-blue yachting costume, with a veritable tarpaulin set back on her beautiful head, and the *Volunteer* legend printed on the band,—he was sure that in all his life he had never seen so exquisite a being.

Youth, health, happiness—oh! she was the incarnation of all that was pure and bright and sweet on earth, and from his soul he worshipped her; and to her, what was he!

From this rhapsody Mr. Van Cortland was somewhat summarily aroused by the courteous tones of the unfailingly gentlemanly Moray.

“I think little Nina the most beautiful woman I ever saw,” Prince Charming remarks, with the admirable tone which impels an instantaneous recognition of the fact that he has known “little Nina” long enough to entirely justify his choice of language.

Jack frowns, and strikes a fresh match for his cigar, also picks up a convenient handbill of the impending Jockey Club races.

“She has certainly cut out the Scotch competitor completely to day,” Jerriss says, with a laugh.

“I should say so. By the way, Stuart,”—the two men saunter away from Jack and his window,—“why don't you go in for—Lord Drummond's cousin? the younger one is not—so—bad!” Mr. Redlon laughs: indeed, since that little assurance from Louise's lips in the Mission Park at Williams, he laughs oftener

than he did ; and he and the Prince are getting fast to be the *bons camarades* that two such genial, clever men must inevitably become—when, that is, there is no woman between them.

"I!" Moray turns a quiet, placid blue eye of surprise upon his companion.

"Exactly."

"My dear Redlon, my mind has long been made up in a rather different quarter."

Jerriss does not know why,—he is hardly metaphysical, certainly no mystic, or in any faintest fashion tinged with the theosophy which masquerades either as spiritualism or clairvoyance,—but, at that moment, between him and Moray Stuart he sees, as plainly as he ever saw anything in his life, Louise Peale standing ; and Moray, who is a mystic, albeit a hard-fisted one,—inapt result of his stone-cutter grandfather and his French education,—Moray also, at the same instant, sees Louise Peale there, too.

It would be difficult to say which mind had worked upon the other ; but the effect was only apparent with Jerriss : he began anew to fear that Stuart loved the woman of his heart. With the bluntness which such a situation at least condones, he turned sharply, and said in a restrained but unhesitatingly brusque tone :

"Miss Peale, you mean?"

"I do not," the other returns as brusquely, his thin, handsome lip curling beneath his thin, light mustache.

"I beg your pardon, Stuart, I—"

"Oh, that is of no consequence, my dear fellow— I say," nonchalantly, "how soon shall we know the upshot of the race?"

"The upshot?" mocks the stanch young American. "I should say that we know that as well this moment as we do that Miss Winthrop has walked away with all the honors to-day."

Moray laughs.

Nina has indeed walked away with the prize. What man in his senses, or woman either, could declare in favor of anything beside that fetching little sailor-frock, and Poppet and Peacock with their *Volunteer* ribbons!

Ida was very graceful,—how far urged by Mrs. Rose it is not

pertinent to inquire,—as, when the news of the *Volunteer's* victory was received at Winhurst, where all the participants in the pageant had been asked to dine, she presented Nina with the thistle-decked, jewelled whip, in token of her friendship and admiration.

The Count, it may be confessed, regarded this transfer of valuable property with what might be termed an evil eye; but then, as he reflected with a hopeful spirit, when *la belle* Ida should have become Madame la Comtesse—*Sapristi!* she would also learn how to be more economical.

The last guest had gone—or rather the last but one: Mr. Redlon still lingered, for it was early yet, chatting with Louise and Drusilla over the events of the day. Nina, the soft flicker of the wood-fire lights playing on her face, leaned back a trifle wearily in her big, cushioned arm-chair, and the small feet, in bewitching tan bottines and tan stockings, were crossed on the satin cushion, peeping from under the hem of her bronze satin gown. Moray was at the high back of her chair; Jack stood leaning against one end of the mantel-board, his warm eyes caressing, with swift-shifting glances, every line and curve of the riant, lovely face of the girl before him.

"You are really tired, are you not?" Prince Charming murmurs, in one of his soft tête-à-tête tones.

"Not in the least!" throwing up her pretty head to glance fully into his eyes.

"You have had enough to weary you, I am sure; those *petits diables* of ponies of yours! By heaven, I trembled when I saw you turn the corner—what mouths they have!"

"Nonsense!" Then, with a little shrug and an uncomfortable moue, "Leave the back of my chair, please; do sit down somewhere like other people."

"If you wish it:" adding in a lower tone, "What have I done to be banished from a place nearer the throne?"

"Spoken ill of my pets"—in a clear, high, refreshing voice. "Poppet and Peacock are the joys of my life; I love them as much as they do each other."

"How much is that, Miss Winthrop?" Van Cortland asks, joining in the conversation a little to Moray's surprise.

"A vast deal. They are half-brothers, don't you know, and

they won't sleep or stand apart. They occupy the same stall; I can't drive one without the other, and one will neither eat or drink unless the other is fed at the same moment. Dear me! when I first bought them they were put of course in separate boxes, but before morning they had kicked the partition between them to pieces, and Poole found them—the darlings!—rubbing their dear, soft, little pink velvet noses together when he went into the stable to rub them down!"

"They certainly are a pair of beauties, although I must say I agree with Mr. Stuart in thinking that they tire you sometimes."

"Not at all! What is the matter with me?" she cries petulantly. "Do I look so dreadfully to-night that everybody is telling me that I am tired?"

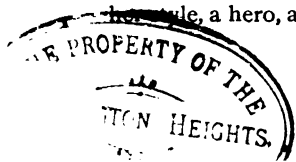
"No, no, no." Moray hurries out a hasty disclaimer, whilst Van Cortland remains silent.

"But I must!" with an appealing little look at Jack; then laughing—"Moray, you adorable ladies' own man, loan me your pocket-mirror, that I may see myself, for myself." Miss Winthrop stretches forth her hand toward the Prince, whilst the other man is occupied in rehearsing for his own benefit the exact sweet voice in which she has uttered the Prince's name, and in recalling to himself, for about the four-hundredth time that day, that he has not had five minutes alone with his young hostess since five days ago, when they drove home from Williams.

"My pocket-mirror!" Moray laughs loudly, repairing the injury to his expression at once with the customary smoothing of his countenance. He is half dazed between delight at the familiar "Moray," and chagrin at the mention of his toilette accessory.

"To be sure!" laughs Nina. "I know you are too clever not to have one; too much the slave of the fair sex not to carry about with you something that we are apt to require at any—nay, every moment. Come," imperiously and sweetly, "give it me."

He hands it to her, drawing forth the ivory bauble from his breast-pocket, whilst Drusilla, from the far end of the library, watches him, and sighs as she concludes that he is "exactly her style, a hero, and a creature of almost feminine refinement."



"Thanks!" Nina holds it up and inspects herself critically. "You are both right; I do look shockingly done out; abominably weary. Ah, well!" returning the mirror to its rightful owner, "nine hours' sleep will put me in perfect condition again—and, by the way, I believe I will ride to Stockbridge for my organ-lesson to-morrow afternoon, instead of driving: one can take an organ-lesson quite as well in a habit as a gown. I am sure poor good Mr. Brown would not know which I had on—he thinks of nothing but that dear ill little wife and baby of his, poor fellow!"

"May I ride over with you, Miss Winthrop?" says Jack, eagerly; and,

"Will you permit me to be your escort to Stockbridge?" asks Prince Charming, sitting gazing into her eyes.

Both men have spoken at the same moment.

Nina laughs as she puts one scrap of a foot up on the low fender, and glances from one man to the other.

"I wonder," she says, with that fine spirit of audacious coquetry which only a woman of intellect knows anything whatever about, and also with that recklessness of hurting either man's feelings which argues youth and not too much confidence in her own powers of inflicting pain—"I wonder which of you wants to go with me more—I may say most, since there is no third in the case, may I not?"

"I could not allow that any man could possibly wish to go more," Moray says, in his low, suave tones. "And I find it equally impossible," bending upon her his light, steadily-held eyes, "to imagine that any man could desire to go less—with you."

Mr. Van Cortland remains silent; only his eyes are pleading for him as they are fastened upon hers.

Miss Winthrop is mute for a full minute, which indeed, by the clock, is occasionally a not inconsiderable time to wait for an answer to as charming a speech as the one last recorded.

"What you have said is very—pretty," she finally responds; "but," shaking her head, "I am quite too impartial to listen to only one side of the case. Has not—I await Mr. Van Cortland's plea."

She looks from one man's face to the other's, and it is not too much to say that it gives her an ecstatic enjoyment to watch

the expression of each, and to wonder, as it flits, what each in his turn will say—in short—

What will you?

Nina Winthrop was the true child of her century; the true, absolute, real, living woman of to-day: sweet, yielding, impetuous, high-minded, pure-souled, yet dearly, inherently as it were, loving these little spendthrift hazards that only such women can either play for or—enjoy—so—

“My only plea,” he rejoins quietly, “is your pleasure.”

And then and there, whatever may have been her self-questionings or demurrings in the past, Nina knows that this man is for her a king's height above all others.

In a moment of keen test—however trivial it may have seemed, however carelessly it may have come about—he has not been found wanting—and oh, woman! to the core of her heart womanly! in the midst of the perplexity in which he has placed her, she adores the *savoir faire* that throws the onus of selection upon her own shoulders, and worships the humility that craves her happiness only.

“Perhaps I will drive after all.”

This is what she says, as she turns her head with a slow little smile toward Louise and Jerriss and Drusilla. Moray rises to straighten a picture on the wall opposite him, and Jack stands still and looks at her.

Presently, Jerriss is saying good-night, and has gone; the Prince has crossed to the dining-room for a glass of water; and Mrs. Odlorne and Miss Peale are already half-way up the staircase.

He is lighting her candle for her at the table in the hall—it is a quaint old way of candle-lighting that they still keep up at Winhurst, notwithstanding the tall lamps and candelabras everywhere about.

“Thank you,” she says, taking it.

Jack sighs as he looks down at her. “And if you do drive to-morrow, might I—go with you—or—”

“I shan't drive,” she says slowly, glancing in the direction of the dining-room, where the pitcher tinkles against the glass.

“You will ride, then, I suppose?”

"Yes," nodding. "I shall ride Snowflake ; he needs exercise, I am sure."

"Alone?"

"Oh dear, no : Poole, of course"—taking two little steps away from him toward the stairs.

He bites in his full underlip until it almost bleeds.

"Oh !" he cries brokenly, and then stops short.

"Well?" Miss Winthrop says sweetly, pausing for an instant to trim her candle.

"Nothing—I beg your pardon—never mind—"

"Oh, I know !" she exclaims, with a low, exulting little laugh—such as a pleased child might utter—"You fear that Poole may not be able to take care of me—is that it, Mr. Van Cortland?" putting one hand up to her round chin, and raising her eyes under their fringing black lashes to glance at him.

He darts across the hall to her, where she stands upon the step.

"May I go?" in a tense voice, while his strong hands clenched, reach out, half madly, half fearfully, toward her.

Nina nods slowly, with parted, silent lips and scarlet cheeks ; and then, before he can say another word, she has vanished up above, and he can only linger there to listen to the soft frou-frou of her garments, and, last of all, to the click of her key in its lock. Good-night !

The following afternoon, Mr. Stuart having gone directly after luncheon down to Wastelands to put the finishing touches to his collection, before the guests he had invited should honor him with their visit, that fascinating gentleman had not the pleasure—or chagrin—of seeing Miss Winthrop set forth attended by Mr. Van Cortland, and the faithful Poole far in the wake.

Nina, in her white cloth habit and white Derby hat,—a daring inspiration of her own, thoroughly well carried out by her tailor,—on her white horse, with the white reins in one hand and the ivory-handled crop in the other, forms as radiantly exquisite a picture, cantering down the avenue, as eyes of man could wish to rest upon.

It is one of those hushed, mellow days of autumn, when the sun shines sheenily through low and mistful clouds ; down in

the west the sky lies black and heavy, boding perhaps one of the sudden showers that startle the hillsides with flash and report, up this way, in October as well as August; the maples along the road are great glorias of splendid color; and the light breeze blows about their pathway the loveliest sun-dyes in the world—eddies and whirls of splendid glow, like burnished copper and splashed vermillion, and all the tender yellow and brilliant orange and russet and dim purplish tints that sing the requiem of the dead and gone summer, and rejoice, with magnificent glow and warmth, that keen, strong winter is already on his road.

"Isn't it glorious!" she exclaims, as they gallop neck and neck; all the rich blood rushing to her cheeks with the touch of the soft, moist air, and the remembrance of his eager eyes as he lifted her into her saddle.

"Glorious!" he assents, checking his horse a bit: hers follows suit.

"What have you been doing with yourself all the morning?"

"Waiting, as patiently as I could, for this moment to arrive—"

"Oh!"—with an impatient little toss of her head: "I mean where have you been? is there any news in town? or, in short, have you nothing amusing to tell me?"

"Oh, indeed yes," he returns, a trifle lugubriously. "I have a great deal to tell you that—I dare say you will find vastly amusing—but as to news—that is another thing—although, to be sure—"

"Oh, what?" laughing. "Have the Drummond-Pecks been committing a *faux pas* or—"

"No; but Mr. Drummond-Peck arrived last night unexpectedly, much to the delight of his family and—the alarm of Mrs. Rose, don't you know?" Jack smiles.

"How delicious!" cries Nina.

"Rather of a lark for the old lady, I should say, especially as Mr. Drummond-Peck appears to be rather—well—"

"Unadapted to Lenox society?"

"Exactly. I've been lounging about Curtis's all the morning—you were nowhere to be seen," with a little air of melancholy reproach.

"Dear, no! Louise and I took luncheon with the Lovells. But tell me, what did you really think of *le père* Peck?"

"He might be worse—I suppose," adds Mr. Van Cortland, thoughtfully.

"Does he talk much and loudly?"

"No, very little; and very subduedly."

"That must be a relief for poor Mrs. Rose! Oh, think of it!" cries Miss Winthrop. "Now Moray—"

How easily his name escapes her lips, her companion does not fail to note.

"Moray will have to ask him, too, to Wastelands, to see the curios and things. It will be quite as amusing as a play, will it not?"

"Quite. Yes, I believe Jerriss met Mr. Stuart in town this morning, and being informed of the arrival, the master of Wastelands sent the invitation forthwith. *À propos*, what day do we go?"

"Not named yet; we must talk it over to-night."

"To-night is that abominable dance at the Pells'."

"Why abominable? I adore a dance."

"Only abominable because it seems to me as if we were never again to have a quiet evening at home."

"Oh, but we shall the night of the ball."

"Will that be quiet?" inquires Mr. Van Cortland ironically.

"Well, no; but it will be at home."

"Yes—but I mean—in short, I am a beggar to complain when you were so good as to let me come with you to-day." His horse's flank touches Snowflake's side; he lightly lays his hand on Snowflake's mane—how blessed even to be near enough to stroke the steed that carries her!—and his eyes are bent full upon her radiant face.

"This is Hawthorne's house—don't you know? the little red house!" exclaims Nina, irrelevantly, as they come up before the tiny farmhouse that Lenox and Stockbridge both lay claim to.

"Yes," murmurs he interestedly, as he would to anything she might say, no matter what.

"There is Susan Pratt, sitting in the window knitting; and there is Mr. Tappan, down in the meadow."

"What else?" Jack says, smiling good-naturedly.

"And Hawthorne wrote the *Tanglewood Tales* here, and papa knew him very well, don't you know; and would you care to dismount and go in and see the kitchen where he—Hawthorne, not papa—wrote? the view of the Bowl from the windows is charming."

"My delicious little guide-book—no—"

"Very well!" with a moue, "if you think it civil to make fun of me."

"I swear I wasn't. I—"

Mr. Van Cortland's further remark is lost in the air, for Miss Winthrop has lifted her reins, and presently the two are running a race, which Jack wins just as they near the sacred precincts of Stockbridge street.

They come to almost a halt at the gates of Ingleside, and the white and the bay walk soberly enough the remainder of the way.

Past the Indian monument and the well-begun bell-tower, with its maudlin wooden-work top-piece; the pretty cemetery, with the evergreens clipped and trimmed to the semblance of some sweet, old-world cloister, where the graves are all softly carpeted with leaves, and where the birds are as merry in the branches as if Death were not in the midst of Life.

Coming by Edwards Hall, Nina looks up.

"Seè," she says, "that big black cloud has crept up to us already; he has ridden faster than we."

"Surely, on the wings of the wind, remember—"

"I wonder if it will rain?" apprehensively.

"No," impatiently. "Do not think of rain, or clouds, or anything that can mar the perfection of—"

"Isn't that Dolly Van Zandt on the piazza of the Stockbridge House?" cries Nina, rising in her saddle. "Oh, no—to be sure! I see it is not. I thought it was, the moment I caught sight of a pink gown—Dolly is so fond of pink. I beg your pardon, Mr. Van Cortland, what were you saying?" just as they come to a stop before St. Paul's, and as Poole already stands at her horse's head.

"Nothing of the least consequence," he returns, as he springs from his saddle and lifts her from hers.

"Take the horses to Pratt's, Poole, as usual, and do not give Snowflake any water, please."

Poole touches his hat and leads off his three charges to the stable down the street.

Jack tries the church-door; it is locked.

"Would you mind getting the key? It is right here at the chemist's. Poor Mr. Brown, he is always late!"

In a moment Jack is back with the desired key, and unlocking the edifice, they pass in together.

In the gathering gloom of the big black cloud, the little church is quite dark, and they feel their way up to the organ-gallery, he putting out helpful hands lest she shall make a misstep; she ignoring these pleasant courtesies, and tripping up quite as if it were broad and cheerful daylight.

Just as Miss Winthrop is drawing off her gloves, and whilst Mr. Van Cortland has picked up her crop and handkerchief, and has surreptitiously swept the latter across his lips, there come a flash of lightning and a roll of distant thunder, and then follows a greater gloom, and presently the patter of big drops on the roof.

"There!" cries Nina, "I felt sure that it would rain. However, we are in a safe shelter, and I dare say it will be over long before my lesson is."

"Oh, to be sure! By the way, what are you going over to-day with this much-to-be-envied Brown?"

"Only exercises—so prepare to be bored; and a little bit of Bach—make ready to run away if you can't stand my rendering of him."

"I believe I shall be able to live through it. Why could not I give you organ-lessons?"

"Ah, you would not be annoyed with such a stupid pupil as I am."

"Would not I?" returns he. "I grant that you would not be likely to learn very much of music from me—but you might of something else."

"Here comes Mr. Brown!" cries Miss Winthrop, as, the rain falling in torrents and the wind blowing a gust, the heavy door swings open, and then shuts with a bang.

"I beg your pardon," leaning over the rail to look; "it is merely a very wet, very small boy—with a note."

The note proves to be from Mr. Brown, filled with apologies for not telephoning to Winhurst; but, "he had hoped to come, up to the last instant, and now, the wife was so ill, so much worse, so nervous—"

"Heaven bless her!" Jack could not help murmuring under his breath, as Nina hastily read aloud the missive.

"And relying on Miss Winthrop's great and uniform kindness," etc., etc.

"Well!" she says slowly, absently watching Jack bestowing unlimited small change upon the young messenger, and speeding him on his way with great briskness and joyfulness.

"Well!" echoes he, happily.

"What are we to do?"

"Do? Stop here until it has done raining, to be sure. Do you mind?" wistfully.

"N—no, I suppose not."

"We could not be in a better place, I am sure," with a half-forced laugh as he glances at her troubled face.

"N—no," more doubtfully than before.

"I believe," cries he, in a strained voice, "that you grudge me the half-hour of your undivided society that Fate has been good enough to grant me!"

For answer, she draws a little nearer to him, and timidly takes her handkerchief from his hand.

He looks down at her.

"May not I even hold the scrap of lace that belongs to you?"

"Play for me," she says, in her low, siren voice, as she sits down and leans her cheek against the rail.

"Shall I?" with joyful eyes. "Do you care to hear me?"

"Yes."

"What shall I play?" as he seats himself.

"Whatever you choose."

Her lids are lowered, and one would say that her thoughts were far away; he fears so as he watches her, while his fingers wander fitfully over the keys.

It is very dark in St. Paul's now; only by the flashes of the

lightning can they see each other plainly; and the dull roar of the thunder mingles and mixes with his music as he plays.

"I cannot play!" he cries, turning away from the organ to her.

"Why not?"

"Because, although you are here with me, you seem to be—you are—far off in your mind."

"Indeed, no—" A sharper flare, a cracking crash, and a down-pour of rain that sounds as if the very floodgates were let loose. By the sudden, brief flicker he sees that she is very pale, and that she is trembling.

"Are you afraid?" he cries, springing up and going to her.

"Only—only a little. You know it seems so high up here; if I were out of doors on Snowflake I should enjoy it, really—but this is so dark and high."

"My little sweet soul," Jack murmurs, recklessly putting his arm across the back of the bench on which she sits. "Let us go downstairs, then. Come, shall we?"

"I will—but you— I want you to play for me—yes, I do."

"But I can't let you go down those beastly dark steps alone."

"I have no fear. I would rather; and then, when I am down safely, I will call up to you, and then you will play me something, won't you?" Her voice is as he has never heard it—full of a wistfulness and a strange, subdued, and subduing charm that is new in her.

"Indeed I will!" fervently.

"The sweetest thing you know?"

"The very sweetest."

In the little lull she descends the staircase, mutely turning off from any offers of escort or assistance.

When she is down she gropes for the door, opens it, passes into the church, and finds her way in the growing darkness to one of the pews opposite the transept.

"I am down," she says, looking up to the gallery, and seeing and being seen in a lurid, momentary glare.

"I see you. Aren't you afraid?" tenderly.

"No—not with—you so near."

He sighs—one of those sighs wrung from the unspeakable, anguished bliss of a true man's soul; and then he plays for her:

gratifies the quaint little whim, putting into his music all the passion and depth and strength of his feeling for her.

What does Jack play?

Something very old, trite, hackneyed—Mendelssohn's Wedding-march. And as she listens, her bright head sinks lower and lower on the end of the pew where she sits by the door, and two splendid tears lie on her lashes.

Why should she weep?

Heaven knows! She had never been so happy before in all her young and not unhappy life.

The sweet, delicious melody rises and mingles with the storm—rises and falls—until Jack can stand it no longer. He starts up and away, and in two seconds at a break-neck speed he is down below—and all in the gloom he has felt his quick way and is kneeling beside her.

"Why did you come down?"

"Good God!" he whispers, not irreverently. "Because I could not stop away from you another instant, my darling, my darling!" gathering her into his two strong, trembling arms. "I love you. I am unworthy—who could be worthy of you?—but," stroking back the little locks from her temples, and raining a shower of kisses upon the cold little hands that his own have found long ago, "I would try so hard to be a better fellow—and if you would only accept me—God knows I am yours whether you will or no—I will be so patient and—and wait until you thought you could care a little about me."

She struggles to free herself. For one brief instant she had forgotten all earthly things in the blessed, sweet sense of the rest of his arms' fold.

"Oh, do not," Nina murmurs brokenly.

"Do not what, my little one?"

"Talk so—"

"Why not? Indeed but I must. I have given myself to you long ago—from the first; that is an old story that you know by heart, I am sure; but, Nina, I ask you to be my wife: my life and love," he whispers, letting her go and clenching his hands over the wooden rail of the prayer-book rest before him, so that it snaps in two, "I cannot live without you—nor would I."

Many a man has uttered the words that Jack Van Cortland

has just spoken; Nina herself had heard them no few times before—but she shivered as she listened, and the fierce conviction, full of joy unspeakable, almost unthinkable, came to her that what this man said was nothing more nor less than the simple truth.

It was a little silence, and then, very slowly, almost fearfully, she put out her hand and laid it upon his brow.

For an instant he does not stir; the light touch of those five small fingers thrills to his inmost soul; and then, as a more brilliant flash than any struck into the gloom, making all the stained-glass windows into shining jewels, and haloing St. Paul's with a second's glory of gemmed and wonderful splendor—lighting with loving glow all the boys' and girls' faces in old Lucca della Robbia's joyous panel beneath the organ-loft, and bathing the girl's face with a radiance that made its pallor angelic—

Then he stretched out his arms to her imploringly.

"My darling," he whispers, "is there any hope for me?"

"I—I like you," she says, just laying her hands in his outstretched and yearning ones.

"And—perhaps—after a while you would— Oh God!" he says brokenly, "you will, you must, you shall love me—not ever as I love you—but a little—and I will be content."

"Shall I?" she says, shrinking a bit as the thunder roars and the torrents of rain come pouring down on the roof above them.

"Yes—don't you think you will?"

"You know."

His passionate kisses fall fast upon the hands he holds.

"Tell me, Nina, did you ever fancy that you cared for any other fellow in the past, you know?"

A little pause.

"Yes," she answers faintly, hating all the episodes that she looks back upon, because they seem to her to rob him of the fulness of entirety which in her lavishness she would bestow.

His clasp tightens as he sighs.

"You—you know," she falters. "I have been engaged several times—and—I always tried to—to love them," plaintively—"but I—never could!"

"Bless your sweet heart!" Jack laughs a triumphant small peal of boyish mirth.

"I couldn't," she repeats contritely.

"Never mind; you shan't try any more."

"Shan't I?"

"No. All I ask is that you allow me to show and prove my love for you. I suppose I am insanely vain," he adds meekly, "but I can't help believing that I shall win—what I want—in the end."

"Conceited boy!" with a little smile. "A very bad, irreverent boy, too," adds Miss Winthrop, reprovingly.

"Why?" wonderingly.

"To have—to have said all the things to me that you have here, in a church!"

"It seems to me," he answers slowly, while his craving arms reach out to enfold her, and in his voice there is the intensity of a divine impassionment—"It seems to me that had I been asked to choose a place to tell you of my worship for you, I should have chosen it to be the holiest spot on earth—if a church is it, I am satisfied. Oh! my little love, my little love, touch me, lay your hand in mine, and give yourself to me now—now! I thought I could wait; I thought I could be patient; but, Nina, I am not strong, only weak—will you have me?"

The tender, pleading voice—the tenderest voice in the world in a woman's ear—the voice of a strong man asking brokenly for the gifts of her love and life.

Nina Winthrop does not know why—could never explain to herself the reason that she did not in this supreme moment—as full of sweetness to her, almost, as to him—give herself to Jack Van Cortland; but she did not. Some strange, restraining power seemed to render her inert, well-nigh passive; and it was with a veritable effort that she roused herself and, guided by she knew not what blind impulse, drew away from him.

The horrible choking sob that convulses him strikes to her heart with as keen an edge as a swift steel blade; but still she is merely outwardly calm, and coolly incapacitated from betraying even a spark of the emotion that she feels.

"Jack." She utters his name very softly and timidly.

"Yes," he replies, recovering himself with a superhuman effort, and with the flashing thought that he would give his life

to lay his mouth on the sweet lips that have just pronounced his name.

"I—I want to tell you that I—like you—"

"Yes—I know—I know," restrainedly.

"Better," Miss Winthrop goes on, "than any human being I ever knew."

She is not aware of it, but he catches a fold of her skirt and presses his cheek against it fiercely.

"And—and—oh, Jack!"—a trifle wildly—"I don't understand—I don't know—won't you wait—won't you wait, a little while?" For the second time her hand rests upon his head.

"As long as you like, my darling. I was a brute just now, don't you know; but you'll forgive me?—and—Nina, do you think any other of those men ever loved you as I do? tell me!"

His arms are about her, his warm breath sweeps her cheek, she can feel and almost see, in the returning light of the lulling storm, the burning hunger of his bonny eyes.

"No; not—not quite."

"By heaven, no! no!" and then Jack's lips—not fiercely, for all the pain of their long craving, but gently and reverently—are laid upon hers, in a kiss that is of holy fire.

CHAPTER ELEVENTH.

"WELL!" cries Mrs. Odlorne, with elevated brows, "I must say that I think it was a most fortunate escape!"

"From what, Aunt Druse?" asks Nina, looking up from the paper to find Jack's eyes fastened upon her face as, it seems to her, she has never seen them before.

"Why! your riding-habit, to be sure! The idea, in the first place, of wearing that white costume on a day like this has been; and suppose you had chanced to be on the open road instead of in the church when the storm came up, where would you have been then, I should like to know?"

"Just where I am now, auntie dear, I suppose—only minus a white habit, and with a mud-colored one instead."

"Exactly."

"The ride home, my dear Mrs. Odlorne, was delicious," cries Jack. "How you would have enjoyed it!"

Drusilla bristles: she has long outgrown the dimensions proper for a costume *de Diane*, and consequently appreciates all the more keenly Mr. Van Cortland's judicious and well-timed remark.

"Did you come back by the road around the lake?" Louise asks, turning to Jack.

"I—upon my soul, Miss Peale, I don't know—er—Miss Winthrop, did we come back by way of the lake or not?"

"Oh yes," answers Nina, blithely.

Louise smiles to herself; Moray makes a mental note; and Mrs. Odlorne happily is at this moment entirely engrossed in brewing for herself a second cup of tea.

"Shall we have nice weather to-morrow, Stuart?" Van Cortland queries, toying with his teaspoon.

"I trust so—that is, if the ladies will find it agreeable to visit Wastelands, and kindly look at my little collection."

"Indeed, yes!" responds Nina, warmly seconded by her aunt.

"And—by the way, I will just telephone down to the Pecks and Mrs. Rose; they are quite crazy to see your lovely things, Prince."

"Delighted, I'm sure. Then to-morrow will suit you?" blandly.

"To be sure. Lou, dear, you have nothing on the tapis for to-morrow morning, have you?"

"I"—Miss Peale hesitates—"I fear that I shan't be able to join you, dear."

"Oh, Lou! Why not?" disappointedly.

"I am sure, Miss Peale—" Moray stops short with one of his most effective glances.

"Really, you see," Louise answers, "almost every moment of my time is taken up now; you forget, but I can't"—smiling archly—"that Miss Peale makes her professional debut in a very brief space of time."

"Indeed, we forget nothing of the kind. I am sure I think of little else; and as to Mr. Redlon, Mr. Van Cortland, and the

Prince, they are as keenly alive to the fact of the fourteenth as you are, dear."

"I really wish that the party should not be marred by a break," Stuart says, with a small sigh and a smile. "I am certain the excellent woman who serves in the capacity of Dame Châtelaine over yonder," glancing in the direction of Wastelands, as he turns his face toward a window, "will be entirely heart-broken if any one of the number of ladies promised her, fails to put in an appearance!"

"Oh, to be sure! old Mrs. Bailey; is she there yet?"

"Dear, no! My dear Miss Nina, old Mrs. Bailey set sail for another and a better world—followed by her esteemed husband a six months later—some four years ago."

"Indeed! Poor, faithful old soul!"

"That she was!" cries Mrs. Odlorne.

"No, no—not Mrs. Bailey; the present incumbent is a spinster, and rejoices in the name of Black. Ah, Miss Peale," turning his steady, frank gaze to her, "won't you come?"

Louise looks up at him from petting Periwinkle, who lies in her lap.

"Do you wish it?" There is an odd gleam in the liquid eyes, a curious inflection in the silvery voice. It makes Jerriss Redlon shudder with jealous dread, and causes Nina to wonder if, after all, Louise may fancy the Prince.

"What a question! I wish anything that will possibly give pleasure to a charming and beautiful woman. Will you come?"

"Yes," she replies simply, "I will."

"That's a darling!" exclaims Miss Winthrop, rising from her seat as Mrs. Odlorne sets the example. "Auntie dear, you telephone down to Curtis's, won't you? Lou, come out on the porch for a moment; it is too enchanting after the shower to stop inside all the evening. Come!"

But Miss Peale, possibly not hearing this summons,—at all events, not heeding it,—remains within, to be praised by Drusilla for her good sense in keeping indoors of a glorious autumn night, instead of risking health—nay, even life itself, if the little widow is to be credited—by seeking the fresh air.

Jerriss stops in, too. Moray, after a futile attempt to meet Miss Winthrop half-way via the other door, gives up, as he sees

that Jack has gotten the better of him by a length, and is already in possession of the field—and the favorite's wrapping, which hangs upon his arm.

"I say, darling," Jack murmurs, attempting to draw her hand within his arm.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Van Cortland; whom are you addressing?" looking about questioningly. "I fancied that no one else came on—that we were alone."

"For that very reason—my darling, we are alone, thank Heaven!"

"You must not—call me—that."

"Why not?"

"Because it is not at all true."

"It is true," he says seriously.

"No—I am not yours."

"But you will be," cries he passionately, stopping with her, as she leans over the balustrade, her face more beautiful than any other's on earth for him as the starlight falls upon it—"you will be. Oh, God! Nina—let me call you as I think of you; let me speak to you as I will. I—I will try not to ask for anything in return, until you see fit to give it to me," humbly.

She looks up at him, and the intensity and whiteness of his face half terrify her; she shudders.

"What is it? what is the matter? Tell me!" he whispers, imploringly, as she turns away.

"Nothing; only—only you frighten me, I believe, when you look like that."

"Like what?"

"Oh, so haggard, and tense, and drawn."

"I wonder," he says at last, "if I am too old for you—am I?" wistfully.

"You're not old!"

"Not positively; but old for you—and my hair is getting horribly gray on the temples."

"I do not care if it is. Stop abusing my—" Miss Winthrop breaks off rather abruptly with the enunciation of the possessive pronoun.

"Your what?" murmurs he. "Ah, my sweetheart, tell me—please!"

"My—property."

Jack laughs—such a little triumphant laugh of passion and gladness—as he catches her hands in his, and bends his head until his hungering lips are pressing swift kisses on the little palms and fingers.

"*Yours!* by God! yes," he says, under his breath.

"Hush!" Nina cries, adding rapidly, nervously: "Why did you ask me if you were too old for me? How old are you? I am sure I do not know."

"Thirty—no—by Jove! I'm forty."

"Well," she answers quietly, "I would not marry a man an hour younger than that. What does a man of less know of—love?" Her voice is very low, but it is fraught with the ineffable message of a splendid, yearning sweetness that thrills to her lover's heart.

"You think not," he says; "but you are a child beside me: twenty-two and forty—eighteen years."

"I'm not twenty-two!" indignantly.

"I beg your pardon!" contritely. "Your aunt, Mrs. Od-lorne—"

"Oh, auntie is very silly sometimes; she supposes that by making me younger than I am, she herself will appear more juvenile! Mr. Van Cortland," drawing herself up with a fine little air of hauteur, "I am twenty-eight."

"Are you? But you don't look so," amazedly.

"I know it. Are you sorry that I am so old?"

"Sorry! My blessed child, whether you were ninety or nineteen makes no difference to me. You are you—and I am your lover until the end of years, or time."

"You ought not to be sorry; you should be glad."

"Why, my darling?"

"Because—you are very craving, and exacting, and insatiable, aren't you?"

"I fear I am horribly all three," laughing joyously.

"Then if I were only a girl of two-and-twenty I should not know how to love you—that is—provided, of course, that I ever do love you at all—do you see?"

"Not half as clearly as I would like to, since that beastly cloud has come over the sky; but I hear,"

"Isn't what I said true?"

"Gospel."

"You're laughing at me."

"Indeed I'm not!"

"Mr. Van Cortland, what are you doing, then?"

"Do you want to know—really?"

"Yes, of course I do."

He leans a bit nearer to her, where she stands by one of the pillars: she hears the wild, quick breath of his strong life come and go on his lips; she almost hears the throbbing of his heart, almost feels the burning wish of his eyes.

"I am trying to keep from taking you into my arms—that is all," he whispers brokenly, with a sigh.

She waits to hear no more; with the faintest flutter of a finger-touch on his brow, she leaves him standing there in the dewy loveliness of the autumn night alone.

As Nina crossed the hall, she saw Jerriss Redlon and Miss Peale in the library. Louise was standing by the table, her hands behind her, a pained and hunted look on her face. He stood before her, his arms outstretched, his eyes eager with beseeching, as the words fell quickly from his lips:

"But why—why—what is it that comes between us?—for, as surely as there is a heaven above, something—someone—does come between us. What is it? Who is it?"

Miss Winthrop hears no more, for at that moment Prince Charming, being perchance a trifle *ennuyé* with Drusilla's charms, enters the apartment, and, with a courteous, graceful "Beg pardon," steps between the two, in quest of his book on the table, and Nina goes on upstairs to her own room.

The candles are already lighted on the secretary, the toilette-table, and the chiffonier. A couple of logs are half in smoulder, half in flame too, on the pretty tiled hearth. It is a charming room, with its dainty blue and white hangings and draperies and curtains, and all manner of blue and white bric-à-brac and china—Dresden and Japanese—the thousand trifles that go to make up the enticing ensemble of a young and fastidious woman's sanctum.

Miss Winthrop crosses to the table and glances into the mirror with a smile that is full of a soft happiness. As she does so she

sees a rather sizable parcel lying between the pin-cushions, duly addressed to her, and in Jack's handwriting.

With a little nervous throb of pleasure and wonder, she cuts the string; and, locking the door as she unfolds the wrapping paper, she sits down in the low chair before the fire, and presently is surveying the two leather cases that repose upon her lap.

She opens the larger: it contains a superb fan of palest green feathers, the handle of wrought filigree in gold, gemmed and gleaming with dozens of tiny emeralds.

With all a woman's love of exquisite things, with all a woman's appreciation of the sweet remembrance, she lays her mouth, half shyly, with a blush upon her cheeks, on the fan.

"He remembered that I said I should wear pale green the night of the ball!" she cried aloud. "Oh, Jack!" whispering his name as tenderly as if he himself were there to listen to it, as she buried her lips again in the fringing down of the feathers.

The other case was much smaller; and Niqa, with large eyes dilating, beheld, as she pressed open the satin-lined lid, half a dozen rings glittering on the velvet cushion.

A burning, shamed flush crept over her whole face and throat as she fingered the beautiful things. There was a cluster of pearls; a bangle of brilliants and emeralds; a ruby, shining like a drop of new-shed blood; opals, turquoises, and a cat's-eye with a black pearl.

She turned them over and over, catching the fire-light on each and all; and then she saw that engraved inside of each small circlet were her own initials, "N. W."

Surely—

Was it possible that Jack Van Cortland had been so sure of winning her that he had gotten these trinkets for her—as he must have done—weeks ago, when he was last in town?

What had she ever done or said to any man living that should permit him to think such a thing of her, and yet—

Her hand lay on the bell to summon her maid and send the boxes at once to Mr. Van Cortland's room—and then, with a little laugh of exceeding joy and rapture, she slipped all the rings on her slender fingers, and spread them out before her,

and smiled, and said softly, as she put on her wrapper and brushed out her long, lovely hair,

"My boy—my boy—my own!"

When Nina heard Louise's footstep on the staircase across the long corridor, which she presently did, she recollected Jerriss's imploring attitude, his beseeching words; and taking off Jack's splendor of gifts, she laid them away, and crossed over and knocked at Miss Peale's door.

"Come."

"It is only I. Are you too sleepy to chat?"

"Not a bit of it; come in, dear," drawing up a cushioned rocking-chair cosily before the fire that burns low upon the little hearth, as she runs the comb through her short golden locks.

"Lou, you look awfully well *en déshabillé*; I don't know that I ever saw you looking better than you do now, in that pink dressing-gown. Jerriss would admire you rather more than the every-day quantity if he could but have a peep at you now!" Nina glances at her friend surreptitiously under her fringed lids.

Miss Peale shrugs her shoulders.

"He will have an opportunity of seeing me in a similar costume before very many days."

Nina starts.

"You know, I wear a white and gold loose gown in the third act."

"Oh! so you do." A pause.

"Lou."

"Well?" sitting down on an ottoman beside her visitor.

"Don't you like Jerriss?"

"Very much."

"He—loves you."

"Are you sure?" flushing.

"Perfectly. Why—oh, Lou, if you do care for him, why do you torment him so?"

"Do I torment him?" paling.

"Indeed, dear, forgive me—but—every time that poor fellow gets the meagre chance of a tête-à-tête with you, he comes out of it thinner and paler."

"Nonsense!" curtly; laughing as she shades her liquid blue eyes from the firelight.

"It isn't—not at all nonsense. Ah, Lou, dear," reaching out a small, warm, friendly hand to the other woman, who takes it quickly into both of hers, "if you do love him, do not trifle with him."

"Why not—if it amuses me?"

"But it wouldn't amuse you. You are not in any way the kind of woman to be amused with that sort of thing."

"Are not actresses supposed to be just the very sort of women, though, to be amused with just such things?" Her pink, short lip curls in a curious self-scorning.

"Actresses are very much like other women, it seems to me; and many a one of them is better far than the reputation she bears. You are an actress,—at least you will be one in a few days' time,—and you, Lou, would not toy with a man's heart willingly; whilst I—I would. That is all."

"Ah no, you wouldn't!" exclaims Miss Peale, warmly, with evident gladness shifting the subject of conversation off of her own shoulders to Nina's.

"But I would; there is an incarnate spirit of evil in me that would force me to torture a man, even if it tortured me too; and besides, I never could, I believe, give myself to anyone—I should have to be taken!"

"Ah, Nina, perhaps you do not know yourself as well as you think you do."

"Perhaps not; but at least I know you; and I am sure that you are too earnest, too true, too genuine, to—behave as I think I should."

Louise laughs lightly as she pushes off her bronze slippers to exchange them for the pink woollen ones that the faithful Gerton has left toasting by the fire.

"Don't laugh like that, please."

"And why not, pray?"

"It sounds like *Dolores'* laugh in the play—not like yours."

"Well, is not that natural enough? Mr. Redlon says that I am *Dolores*."

"Oh, not in that sense; he only means that were you placed as she was in life, you have the capacity to suffer as she had."

"And I suppose, then, that I have never suffered?" dreamily.

"Surely not—as she did."

"Ah, of course not."

Nina looks up swiftly as the bitterness and brevity of this speech fall upon her ear.

"By-the-way, Nina, I must show you that account of my gowns in the *World*." Louise rises and crosses to the table.

Nina looks after her in silence, and mechanically takes the paper that is put into her hand.

"Two columns!" says Louise.

"I see." Nina lays down the sheet quietly, and throwing her arms up above her head as she leans back in the cushions, says, with a yearning of sympathy in her young voice that no one could mistake,

"Louise, you are very dear to me; I wish you would tell me what troubles you—if anything does; that is, if it would be any relief to you."

"Relief?" The other woman echoes the word as if to her intelligence it bore some strange, foreign, unguessable meaning. "Relief? I have never thought of relief"—and in one instant her clear face is flooded with the passionate memory of a pain that is neither dead nor buried.

"Think of it now," Nina says, bending toward her. "Tell me, for now I am sure there is something that worries you. Is it about Jerriss?" she asks tenderly, "or—or—anyone else? Moray Stuart, perhaps?"

A quiver passes over Miss Peale's face as she listens with lowered lids.

"I used to hope that you and he would—like each other very much; but I suppose it's Jerriss," gently.

Louise inclines her head.

"I knew it. Oh, Lou, then—he is such a lovely fellow; why can't you care for him?"

Louise lays Nina's hands out of hers; she rises, and goes over toward the window, drawing the curtains closer.

"I do," she says simply.

"I thought so!" gleefully clasping her hands together; "I am so, so glad! but—then there isn't any trouble after all, is there?"

"Trouble?" passing her hand wearily across her brow—"oh yes, there is—I mean"—She laughs mirthlessly. "You know, dear, the course of true love never did run smoothly!"

"And I am horribly rude and ill-bred to attempt to catechise you."

"You haven't."

"I thought that—you might like to—to—talk to me; it is a comfort and a relief to most people."

"It would be to me, too, I suppose."

"Then—" Nina reaches out her hand with all the grace and sweetness of a true and earnest friendship.

Louise is standing still by the mantel, cool, impassive, pallid, one instant; the next, she is on her knees before Nina Winthrop, and laying her head in the other woman's arms, while she trembles from head to foot.

"My dear!" whispers Nina, "what is it? There—Lou—there!" smoothing the soft rings of hair, and laying her lips on the burning cheeks.

"Oh!" cries she, "Nina. Nina! I—I am a married woman—and I love him, love him—love him!"

"Jerriss?"

"Jerriss."

"My poor dear, my poor dear!"

"Don't you despise and spurn me for the deception—the lies—oh, I am nothing but a cheat, a falsehood, a—"

"Hush, hush!" soothingly.

"You see;" she hurries on recklessly, "I met him first when I was at Mrs. Reed's—before you came. He was there one evening for some private theatricals that we had at Easter, and he praised my acting; then—well, no matter. My father died, and that summer I met him again at the White Sulphur, where I was with my guardian and his family. I came back to school; we met, you and I—that was my last term. Nina, when I left Mrs. Reed's that sunny June morning, the year I was sixteen, I went South with the man who became my husband as soon as we could reach a spot to have the ceremony performed in—it was a little Texas town. I feared to have it done any nearer New York, although he had had everything arranged for our marriage at the City Hall there." She pauses for an instant,

while Nina Winthrop's soft lips are laid tenderly upon the hands she holds.

"Then—well, then my guardian died. My father's only brother was living in California, and—not so strangely as it seems, perhaps—I was able by writing letters to keep them all under the impression that I was visiting girl-friends at the North. This lasted for six months. I was North, that was true enough: and then—"

"And then?" echoes Nina, softly.

"Well—" throwing back her lovely head, and laughing wildly—"it is an old, old story, my dear girl. My husband deserted me—very quietly, very courteously, very swiftly."

"In six months!" Nina cries, unguardedly.

"In six months. You see, I had not the power to keep him longer, it seems."

"And you loved him?"

"I did love him—yes," quietly.

"But not any more."

"I despise—I loathe—I abhor him!"

"He is alive, then?" the other murmurs, sadly.

"Oh, yes, yes, yes! alive, well, strong, happy, respected, admired, perhaps loved!"

"Good God!" cries the girl who listens; "and—does no one know—"

"Does anyone know of my marriage? Why should they suspect his?"

"Have you ever heard from him—since?"

"Never; not a line, a word, a message."

"And what—how—"

"Have I lived? For a time I stayed on where I was, cheating the people and myself with the fantasy of my husband's return—mad, insane, what you will! And then one day, when a letter came back to me unopened, I—went South. You see, fortune favored me: my guardian was dead, as you know; his wife and daughters were abroad when I returned to New Orleans; and, in short, I had no difficulty in resuming, in a sense, the old life of my dead girlhood. I was called to California by my uncle's illness, then his death. You know the rest: my change of name, the fortune, the amateur stage, and

now the real. And, after all, what has my life been; what must it always be, but a play, until—the end? That, I suppose,” wearily, desperately, “will be real.”

“But could you not—are you not free—to—to marry again if you choose?”

“No, I am not free; I have never taken any steps to effect absolute freedom. Think of the nature of my position, and what scrutiny and provings it would have entailed should I ever have sought to make myself free. Remember, dear, my marriage was a secret one; and in the profession I enter so shortly, are there not already too many women’s scarred lives that I should bring another to swell the ranks, and that other Jerriss Redlon’s future wife? Oh, I love, honor, respect him too much, too much!”

Nina sighs.

“And now,” continues Louise, “do you despise me for my deceptions?”

• “I honor you for your bravery. I love you more than ever for your sufferings. Lou, Lou! ‘Despise’ you! No!”

Louise Peale falls upon her knees; she folds Nina in her arms; and now at last the pent-up tears come, and she sobs until her slender form shakes and throbs.

“Poor, poor child! my dear, my dear! there, there!” and then—that mute sympathy which true women understand from each other.

When Nina rises to go it is nearly two o’clock in the morning. She says, shaking her head sadly, as she lays tender hands upon Louise’s head, tenderer lips upon hers,

“Poor Jerriss! My heart bleeds for both of you!”

And Miss Peale smiles a wan little smile as she holds the candle, and then presently closes the door and locks it.

She staggers to the lounge; she flings herself down upon it, and in her agony she moans over and over again the last words her friend has spoken.

“Poor Jerriss! poor Jerriss! *my* heart bleeds for you. If it were I alone—but it is he—he, too, who must suffer on, and on, and on; for he loves me—and I love him. Ah, Heaven! Heaven! Heaven!”

Wildly she starts up, catches the prompt-book of *The*

Brazilian from the book-rack, and, with an abandon that is only a broken heart beating in a living body, she goes through the terrible scene of the third act.

It is his play, and for him she will succeed ; this much at least she can do—and she will.

And it is thus that the night is spent away before the day set apart for visiting Wastelands, the estate of Mr. Moray Stuart.

CHAPTER TWELFTH.

MRS. ROSE was in her element : she really was quite *au fait* of curios and all sorts of art things, and Prince Charming's collection was one to cause the enthusiast in such affairs to tremble with a fervor of superlative admiration. The worthy lady ambled up and down the long drawing-room, softly lighted for the occasion with any number of antique lamps and swinging lanterns ; for even the eleven-o'clock sun of a brilliant autumnal day had no chance of illuminating a room on the ground-floor of Wastelands ; the low-growing, dank foliage was too thick to admit even a ray of the blessed sunshine.

It was only upon the tardy arrival of the Drummond-Pecks (Mrs. Rose had been obligingly fetched by Jerriss in a village-cart) that she ceased from exclamation-points, and turned to present Moray to the head of the Drummond-Peck house.

Prince Charming extended his hand with cordial directness, while with his ready, pleasant smile he expressed his hospitable gratification at forming the acquaintance of his new guest.

William Peck surveyed his host with fixed eyes, as, slowly putting out his large, lean hand to meet the other's grasp, he said quietly, "Thank you ; but it seems to me this ain't the first time for us to meet, sir."

"No?" Stuart says, searching his deficient memory with the contracted brow we always summon to our aid on such distressing social occasions.

"No," returns the other man, with a slow but jocular smile.

"I can't—for the life of me ! really—" the Prince says, gazing steadily into Mr. Drummond-Peck's weather-beaten visage.

"You don't mean to say't you've forgotten a little Texas town called Oliver, have you?"

"Oliver! Texas! My dear sir, this is some mistake. I never was in Texas in my life. Really, Miss Peale," turning to Louise, who is wandering rather aimlessly about the room with Ida, "here is my kind friend, Mr. Peck, saying that he and I have met in Texas—I, who have never been farther south than Washington in my life!"

"Really!" Miss Peale laughs gayly as she glances round and takes her first real glimpse of Mr. Drummond-Peck. "Who can your *alter ego* be, I wonder, Mr. Stuart?"

William Peck surveys the young lady, to whom he had of course been presented, *en masse*, a few moments before; and then he turns puzzled eyes from her radiant face back to his host's, and, with a half-smothered gasp, picks up a Sèvres vase, and holds it meditatively in his fingers for a long time—so long a time, in fact, that his amiable spouse speaks to him three separate times before he vouchsafes a reply to so simple and chaste a remark as,

"Now ain't this cup real elegant, Mr. Peck?"

"Well, yes, 'tis, I'll 'low, real elegant."

"Why, pa! you ain't a-lookin' at it at all—see here, this one."

"Yes, you're right—of course, this one." Mr. Peck lays down the Sèvres bit, and takes from the hand of his better half the Dresden bowl she is rapt over.

"Mr. Stuart is so elegant and fascinating, my dear," murmurs Mrs. Drummond-Peck to her husband, as they stand for a moment side by side, surveying the really beautiful and artistic effect of the long, low room literally crammed with objects of art.

"Ye-s," returns the worthy cattle-king, with a somewhat elongated accent.

"We met him—the girls and me—on that trip down the Rhine when you wasn't with us—don't you remember, pa?—when you stopped over at Cologne, or somewheres, to see that English capitalist."

"Yes," repeats Mr. Peck, thoughtfully; "I remember."

"He's just splendid!"

"Yes." Mr. Peck, with this third edition of the assenting

monosyllable, replaces the Dresden cup on its velvet stand, and in a vague way accepts the proffered hospitality of bouillon and sandwiches, which at this happy moment make their appearance to disturb the evidently wandering train of his reflections.

Nina, meantime, is rambling over the old house,—curios and cups, however costly and remarkable, having but little charm for her. Jack has followed her out into the entry.

"You haven't said good-morning to me yet," murmurs he, reproachfully, at the same moment putting out his hand to take hers.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Van Cortland; I did tell you good-morning in the breakfast-room at least two hours ago."

"Oh yes—the words were uttered; but—my good-morning is not to be like everyone's else."

"Indeed! Why not?" coldly.

"Because," taking the small, reluctant hand in his, "it's not—that's all. I want at least a touch of your fingers to assure me that—that—" Jack hesitates painfully as he recognizes that he is hopelessly involved in a sentence which truth will not allow him to end with entire satisfaction to himself.

"That?" patiently echoes Miss Winthrop, looking most innocently up into his face.

"Oh, little one, don't be hard on a fellow!"

"I'm not hard. I—want to thank you for the fan—so much; it is exquisite."

"You said you were going to wear a green gown for the ball, and I got it made for you to match."

"It was very good of you," she murmurs courteously; "very. I appreciate your thoughtfulness immensely; but—" drawing the hand from the big one that has so far succeeded in retaining it for all its restlessness.

"What is it?" cries he. "I have done something that I should not, I am sure; you are vexed with me?"

"Not in the least with you, Mr. Van Cortland. I presume I have no one but myself to blame for—for—"

"For what, my darling? tell me," coaxingly.

"For—for those rings. Of course, of course," cries she, hurriedly, "you must take them all back, I could not think of accepting one of them—I—"

"Why not?" with astonishment.

"Because it—because I could not with dignity."

"But, little one, I got them expressly for you—had your initials put in them, and selected them, oh!" joyously, "a long, long time ago!"

"I am aware of it," scornfully; "I mean I presumed as much."

"Well, then?"

"All the more must you take them back. How did you dare—at least, Mr. Van Cortland, I really do not see what right you had to be even thinking of getting gifts for me—'long, long ago'!"

"But I did. I have bought lots and lots of things for you, always, from the—the beginning. Whenever I saw anything very jolly and pretty, I always went in and got it for you! Why not? was it wrong?"

"It was worse—it was the height and sublimity of presumption."

"No, it wasn't. I believed that you would be mine then as firmly as I believe it now. Why was I not free to buy things for you if I saw fit?"

"And in case I—am not yours—" whispers Miss Winthrop, "what then?"

"I never thought of it," he says simply. "If I had, I should have gone mad."

"But supposing," persists she, "that I decide that I do not like you at all—just think about it, now—what will you do with—the things—marked with my letters?"

"I don't know," he answers helplessly and gravely. "I suppose," shutting his teeth together, "if you threw me over—I— Oh, good God! Nina, I have always thought myself a strong man, but when I am with you I am weaker than a woman."

"Ah!" she says, sadly and regretfully.

"What would I do with the poor little trinkets that have given me so much pleasure in the getting for you—is that what you wish to know?"

She nods her head.

"Nothing. My executors would make what disposition they saw fit of them." He turns off shortly.

"Jack!" cries she swiftly, but very low.

"My darling!" turning back to her eagerly, "what is it?"

"Nothing—no matter. I'm going into that room over there."

"Perhaps the door is locked."

"I'll try." Miss Winthrop lays her hand upon the knob, and turns it easily.

"May I come too?" asks he, peering into the gloom of the indistinguishable apartment.

"No, certainly not. Prince Charming has given *mê carte blanche* to go any and every where—but you are not me."

"Not yet," murmurs Mr. Van Cortland, with a little smile. "What am I to do meantime, then?"

"Go and devote yourself to Ida and Josie. Run like a good obedient boy—or no! you may bring me a cup of bouillon. Don't hurry!"

Nina pushes open the heavy door still farther, and enters the room. In a few moments her eyes become accustomed to the darkness, for darkness comparatively it is. The blinds are tightly closed, and lying against them, the outgrowth of years, the syringa bushes press, a very wall of impenetrable verdure.

It is a long, low room, exactly corresponding in size and shape to the one on the opposite side of the hall, where the Prince's guests are at this moment gayly disporting themselves. The dust lies thick upon the carpet, the furniture, the tables, hangings, and books; cobwebs hang in undisturbed festoons from the pictures and cornices; and the last fire that was built on the wide hearth lies a mass of grayish dust and blackened log upon the tiles.

Curiously, half on tiptoe, Nina crosses the floor. It seems to her like a page out of some romance,—this dead room just across the way from the life and laughter of its *vis-à-vis*,—and in a way it appeals to her imagination.

She leans over the big centre-table to look at a yellowed newspaper lying just where it had fallen half-opened from some one's hand—how long ago?

The date is fourteen years old.

As she lays it down it crackles beneath her touch, and her eyes fall upon a photograph in an old-fashioned blue velvet frame.

Miss Winthrop takes it in her hand; she rushes to the open

room door, where the light is broad and free, and stares at the picture she holds, with a face that pales in its intensity of amazement.

It is a portrait of Louise Peale.

A lovely, picturesque, but slightly faded photo, taken in a furred cloak and cap.

Nina hears Mrs. Rose's voice, Mrs. Rose's ample, flowing skirts swishing along the oil-clothed hall. With an impulse born of she knows not what instinct, she slips the picture out of the frame, turns to the table, replaces the empty velvet beneath the newspaper, and, with a strange smile on her trembling lips, moves to meet Mrs. Rose as that lady enters the room.

As she does so she drops the picture on the floor.

Mrs. Rose and Miss Winthrop both stoop to pick it up. The older woman, being neither nervous or apprehensive, merely keen and intelligent, and unconsciously scenting something in the situation, reaches it first, and, blandly looking at the card, says,

"Indeed! a portrait of Miss Peale—and here!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Rose," extending a graceful hand; "the picture is mine."

"Yours, my dear?" scanning it with attentive eyes.

"Yes. You have not seen this one of Louise before, I dare say?"

"No, I have not," markedly.

"It is as *Marianka* in the "*Dîner à la Russe*," an old part of hers." Still that graceful, insistent little gray-gloved hand is extended toward Mrs. Roosevelt Rose.

"Ah, I see! and—"

"And I am taking it to Crofts; he is at Stockbridge, you know, and such an admirable artist! I am going to have him paint a life-size from it, as a surprise—"

"For Miss Peale?"

"Yes." At last the photo is relinquished by Mrs. Rose, and Nina slips it into her pocket, just as Jack comes in bearing the coveted cup of bouillon.

"Awfully sorry, Miss Winthrop—oh, I beg your pardon, Mrs. Rose!" half-stumbling over the excellent lady's flowing draperies and lengthy scarfs. "The worthy Miss Black was just

brewing some fresh bouillon, and I had to wait for it to be done."

"Thanks, very much." Nina takes the cup.

"Now, Mrs. Rose, what can I do for you? Chocolate, an ice, or what?"

"Nothing, Mr. Van Cortland; nothing in the world. I saw this open door, and with my passion for the curious, the antique, the possibly picturesque, I blundered in. What a lovely old fireplace, to be sure!"

"Lots of dust and ashes!" Jack says, pertinently touching the débris with the tip of his patent-leather shoe.

"Yes, indeed! Why!" ejaculates Mrs. Rose, "I verily believe the place has not been looked into for years; and positively, now that my sight has become accustomed to this sepulchral half-light, the whole room has the air of not having been stepped in since the last occupant stepped lightly out. I wonder--"

"By Jove! there's a bit of the romantic about it, isn't there, though?" interrupts Jack. "See, Mrs. Rose! under the sofa yonder—a woman's slipper."

"To be sure—a—" Mrs. Rose stoops, and prods the shoe with her parasol—"very pretty, small bronze slipper. I really might write a poem on this sweet, dusty, cobwebby, old, forgotten room and that dainty, dropped-in-a-hurry-looking little shoe!"

"Do so!" cries Jerriss, who appears in the doorway. "It is a deuced pretty little shoe," picking it up on the point of his cane. "I say, Stuart," as Moray looms up with Ida, attracted by the laughter and voices across the hall—"I say, Stuart, give us the history of yonder bit of leather and beads."

Prince Charming frowns, then smiles, finally laughs good-humoredly, with a deprecating shrug of his shoulders.

"My dear boy, I'll tell you all that I can about it, which is merely a surmise: the house was rented for a six months, I believe, some time back, to a gentleman and lady—" The Prince hesitates, almost imperceptibly, as he speaks—so imperceptibly that no one who listens, save Nina Winthrop, notes the defection. "And I presume—perhaps—when the lady left Wastelands, she forgot to take this pretty slipper with her. Such is its history, so far as I can tell it."

"Was the rental paid?" inquires Jerriss, jocosely.

"Never," answers Mr. Stuart, succinctly.

Jack and Redlon and Mrs. Rose laugh merrily.

"How long ago were—how long is it since Wastelands was rented to these people, Prince?" queries Nina, coolly.

"Well—about—let me see: about fifteen years, I should think; but I can't be positive. Why, Miss Nina?"

"Why! Oh, I don't know," with a little spoiled laugh. "For something to say, I suppose."

Miss Winthrop turns away and chats with Ida Peck; but she has not taken ten seconds to determine in her own mind that Louise Peale and her husband spent their half-year of married life in Moray Stuart's house, and that thence the heart-broken girl went desperately forth when, as she thought, life and love were to be for her, forever after, dead-sea fruit.

Merrily, with many a jest and laugh, the gay party ran up and down the creaking staircases of the Prince's house; peered into musty pantries, explored the garrets, and descended to the cellars, where, even yet untouched, were stored some rare old wines.

"Bah!" Moray exclaims, as he assists Nina up the staircase and leads the way to the front door. "Do come for a little while out of this dust and rust and moth-eatenness, into the free air of heaven!"

"Why? Are you afraid that an hour's communion with long-neglected rooms may give you an—untimely wrinkle?" laughs Nina, "or—"

"It is 'or'—and 'or' is that I have not³ seen you to-day." He looks at her as she stands in his porch in the sunshine.

"What a pretty boat!" cries Nina, as her eyes find the lake and a tiny yacht at anchor off the shore. "Is that the new one?"

"Yes. It came up yesterday."

"Oh, what have you named it?"

"Nina."

"Yes?" with an ill-pleased curl of the pretty lips.

"Do you object?" anxiously.

"Indifferent."

"Ah! Will you go for a sail with me?"

"Er—yes—I suppose so."

"When?"

"When? Whenever you like." Miss Winthrop is standing staring off into the blue of the water, but she is perfectly conscious that Mr. Van Cortland—three feet away, and with deferentially bowed head, apparently absorbed in Mrs. Odlorne's oratorical effort on nature *pur et simple*—is nevertheless paying strict attention to her and her companion.

She cannot help it; or she does not—whichever way it seems best and most agreeable to regard this unamiable trait of her character.

"Really?" warmly.

"Assuredly," matter-of-factly.

"To-night?"

"This evening," amends Miss Winthrop.

"You'll be asking a party to join us, I dare say," with a laugh that essays mirthfulness, and dies in the effort.

"Not at all; I should not presume to invite people to sail in a boat not belonging to me."

"It is yours," he whispers.

"Ah, you learned that in Spain," returns she. "*À la disposition d' Usted.*"

"I am not jesting."

"Oh! then you desire me to invite everybody—*par exemple?*" turning to glance over her shoulder into the house, where the rest are chatting.

"You know I want you, and you alone, in every sense of the words!" he exclaims hotly.

"I had thought so," reproachfully, with a smile.

"This evening, then?"

"Yes."

"At what hour?"

"You may name it; it will save me the trouble."

"Eight o'clock?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Now, my dear Nina!" Mistress Drusilla's high, clear notes pierce the sentimentalism of the Prince's pose and inflection with an uncompromising commonplaceness.

"Yes, auntie?"

"I think we had better be leaving this charming scene: remember Mrs. Rose's little reading this afternoon, and then the Porters' dance to-night."

"Are you going to this dance?" Moray asks, *sotto voce*.

"Can you ask?" Nina Winthrop could not by any possibility have explained to herself why she looked up at Moray Stuart with at least half her soul in her lovely eyes; but in after-days, not so distant, she was glad, intensely glad, that she had bestowed upon the master of Wastelands just that glance, and just that perilously sweet intonation.

"What's that about my little reading, my dear Mrs. Odlorne?" purrs Mrs. Rose, emerging from the house, her spacious countenance lubricated, as it were, into a more than usual supply of smiles by the good cheer of which she has partaken.

Mrs. Rose was a most amenable person; viands ever found her pliable, and left her more so.

And chatting thus, the little party saunters out of the gloomy old house into the sunshine, and presently is dispersing.

Jack and Nina, Jerriss, Louise, and the host signify their intention of walking back to Winhurst.

"Are you going directly home, my dear?" asks Mrs. Rose of Nina, as she is stepping into the cart in which Ida is to drive her to Curtis's.

"Oh yes, indeed, Mrs. Rose; why?"

"Oh, nothing, my dear; only I thought if you were going to Stockbridge, and should chance to see Mr. Crofts—" A significant, almost indistinguishable halt.

"Yes," puts in Miss Winthrop, flushing. "What then, Mrs. Rose?"

"I would be so indebted if you would ask him to come over to my little affair this afternoon, and kindly say to him that I did not know he was in the Berkshires until this morning."

"Certainly, and with pleasure."

Mrs. Rose drives away with that air of becoming satisfaction which always radiates from a lady who has performed a social duty in a graceful and unmistakable way.

Miss Winthrop hesitates a few moments, and then,—alone, and unheeding the offers and prayers of both the Prince and Mr.

Van Cortland,—with Poole in the rumble, turns the ponies' heads toward Stockbridge.

Mrs. Rose's little reading was an unqualified success—a sort of mildly literary *soi disant* intellectual sandwich of elocutionary and oratorical effort on her part, between slices of music, more or less amateurish or professional, on the part of other people.

A kind of entertainment which sent the admirable M. de Vervens promptly to sleep, and caused him the unspoken mental determination that he had already been too long away from his usual haunts.

Mr. Crofts was present; but Miss Peale, owing to an easily understood pressure of affairs, was not.

Dinner was over at Winhurst; in fact, it was almost on the stroke of eight. Nina was presumably in her room, and Prince Charming paced the hall with a leisurely, secure sort of tread until the quarter had chimed from the tall clock at the farther end. Then he drew out his watch, put it back in his pocket for the second quarter, only to draw it out again and hold it for the third.

He was a patient man: had for years so ruled his propensities as to have constructed for himself a species of luxury from the very cultivation of that excellent quality. He was now a man, too, to smile over what he saw fit to designate as the "perennial coquetry of a young and pretty woman." He intended to offer himself to Nina Winthrop this evening—feeling about as sure of his acceptance as a career of marked success in all its various undertakings would naturally cause a man of his calibre to feel. He had a poetic sentiment in desiring to say what he had to say to her in his boat, on the waters of the lake that lay between her lands and his own—a not ungraceful and certainly an ideally charming wish to ask Nina Winthrop to be his wife whilst they two should be drifting under a star-lighted, brilliant sky over the crystal sheet that might catch, but could never echo the story of his love. For love her he did, with a passion of intensity, a fierceness and recklessness, that few would dream com-

patible with the cool, polished, almost glossy exterior of Mrs. Odlorne's dear Prince Charming.

Nine o'clock.

He heard the fair Drusilla's active voice bewailing the lateness of the hour at which fashionable dances began; heard Louise's name called by the matron; Jack's footstep across the upper corridor; Jerriss arriving at the door; and, at last—her gown softly sweeping down the stair.

He glanced up. Miss Winthrop stood a few steps above him, in a ball-gown of white, fastening a refractory bracelet, with a well-bred little frown on her forehead.

He bit his lips in cruelly for an instant.

"You are ready, I see," he says quietly.

"Almost," she assents, still working at the obstinate chain of pearls and gold. "And you?"

"Not quite; I have yet to get into my top-coat; it will be chilly on the lake to-night."

She cannot but admire the *sang froid* that dares such calm appropriation.

"The lake?" echoes Miss Winthrop, inquiringly.

"Yes."

"I thought it was a dance at the Porters'. Is it—am I mistaken—a boating-party?"

"Of two. You had not forgotten; why do you pretend that you had?" he asks gravely.

"To be sure! But—you will forgive me? I have changed my mind. How delicious to be a woman and therefore endowed with the indisputable privilege!"

And so they go to the Porters' dance.

Mr. Stuart, being a gentleman of a moderately determined disposition, and of a nature that, long held in, but now arrived at its boundary limit, brooks no further delay, manages very cleverly to have Miss Winthrop to himself for just precisely that length of time which proves for him a very *mauvais quart d'heure*.

She refuses him with a laughing, yet point-blank directness which admits of no present alternative but a courteous and apparently heart-broken silence.

CHAPTER THIRTEENTH.

MR. STUART proposes leaving Winhurst the following day—that is to say, he proposes to in speech, but has no idea of carrying out this perfectly correct-under-the-circumstances exodus in action. Nor does he: the little widow plaints and raves; Jack joins in her general dolor; Redlon murmurs with her; Miss Peale is too busy with her début to be cognizant of much else; and Miss Winthrop, good-humoredly, will not listen to his going until after the ball.

So he remains; and is so far master of himself and the situation as not to cause his younger hostess one regret at his being still a guest beneath her roof.

The ball is for the tenth: Louise's début is to be on the fourteenth. Fortunately, owing to her all-summer rehearsals with her company, she is not obliged to be in town until the day previous to the one fixed for her stepping before the footlights in a purely professional capacity; therefore it is, and much to Nina's delight, that her friend is to make her last appearance in society at the Winhurst ball, which has promised to be the most brilliant event of a very brilliant season, as well as the practical winding-up of the autumnal gayeties of Lenox.

Nor is this promise unfulfilled. A more magnificent scene it would be difficult to imagine and hopeless to attempt in the description, save to say that all that lamps, silken hangings, and Pinard could do was done. The house presented one oddity and novelty in decoration due entirely to a whim of its young mistress's; that is, that all the adornments were in green—no flowers but green orchids; vines, palms, smilax, pines, and evergreens; green draperies, lamps, and candles; and the galleries, piazzas, grounds, and summer-houses lighted with pale-green lanterns. The effect was curious and charming.

In this novel light Nina stood, an exquisite figure in her pale-green gown, her emeralds, and with Jack's fan swinging back and forth in her hand. Louise was beside her, regal, in a light-yellow costume, sparkling with topazes, and bending with fin-

ished and perfect grace as each fresh guest entered the ball-room.

The little widow, radiant in love's own hue of rose, smiling, beaming, happy, for Prince Charming was very near her, and had seemed, as she expressed it, "now, once more her own true friend again these last few days"—the little widow, then, was in her element, and even found Miss Peale looking beautifully through the improving lens of Moray Stuart's propinquity.

"Doesn't she look well to-night, dear Prince?"

"Oh," with a shrug too faint to be either Continental or ill-bred, "fairly well; actresses have a trick of looking well to order, you know, my dear Mrs. Odlorne."

Drusilla unconsciously attempts a surreptitious survey of her own judiciously augmented charms, in one of the many mirrors that encircle the ball-room.

"You naughty boy!" cries she effectively, having discovered herself to be intactly flawless.

"Ah!" murmurs the Prince, "when a man has knocked about the world as much as I have, he is apt to be able to distinguish the true from the false." A bewildering glance accompanies this neat little speech.

"You don't object, though, to a little—just a *soupeçon*, you know—of *poudre-de-riz*, do you?" queries the little woman anxiously, as she recalls the free use of the puff on her own round cheek.

"By no means; it is rather the thing: but paint—"

"Do you think she paints?" exclaims she, in tones of horror.

"How should I know? I don't think about her at all, to tell the truth;" and his cold, clear, clever eyes fall upon Nina's face as he speaks.

Nina, who, languid and warm from her last waltz with the dancing-mad Lovell boy, is permitting Mr. Van Cortland to fan her, sits in one of the many little alcoves looking out upon the scene.

"Aunt Druse is so pleased," she says, looking up at Jack with happy eyes. "She wanted to-night to be a sort of crowning success, and—it seems to be."

"Indeed it does; it naturally would be: it is yours."

"Ah!" she smiles and shakes her head, "that doesn't follow by any means."

"Something else does follow, though," he says, anxiously gazing at her.

"Which is?"

"That Miss Winthrop is tired. I wish," hotly, "that you would not dance with—with any other man but me!"

"Why, pray?"

"Because they tire you out."

"Oh no; I am not in the least tired."

"What sensation do you suppose I experience, Nina, when I see you with another man's arms about you—even in that way?"

"I don't suppose anything about it."

"You know, then?"

"Certainly not."

"A profound, maddening jealousy."

"Then," she says, speaking very low, "you cannot love me, for perfect love knows no jealousy!"—*wisely. She does not know.*

"Hear the child!" cries he. "The more perfect the love, the more intense and certain the jealousy! My darling, don't you know that there is no such thing as love without it? Philosophers and that ilk may prate of it as they choose—love is insatiate and craves all; and so long as aught is bestowed elsewhere, no matter how trifling or meaningless or slight it may be, jealousy is each day born anew. Not the mean, crawling jealousy that would debar you from everyone and everything except my eyes and arms, but the yearning wish to have you for my own, forever."

"Hush!" whispers she. "You must not talk so; it is very, very improper!"

"Let us, in heaven's name, preserve the proprieties at all hazards! Come," with a joyous air, "let us go outside. I know where your wrap is; I will fetch it."

"The green one," murmurs Miss Winthrop as he goes.

"There!" returning. "Now see how proper I shall be; in fact, a perfect model!"

They leave the crowded room together and unobserved, save by Moray Stuart's watchful eyes; and even his discovery of the

path they take in the garden is interrupted by the worthy Mr. Drummond-Peck, who, somewhat crushed by the double burden of evening-dress and a prospective Count for a son-in-law, is wandering aimlessly about, mentally contrasting the scene before him with the home of his early married life.

Ida's engagement had been announced the day previous, and to-night finds Mrs. Rose quite the centre of a wondering and admiring little group.

The wonder, it is true, remains unexpressed, but is none the less patent to her on that account; none the less a tribute to the skilful social generalship that has contrived, in the brief course of eight revolving months, not only to launch the Drummond-Pecks on the inland sea of New York society, but to capture so valuable a privateer as a genuine nobleman, who had, *pro tem.*, drifted out of his own exalted coterie to try his luck with the "American young ladies."

The diminutive Count—irreproachable as to clothes, with his carefully perfumed raven locks, his waxed mustache, his little hands encased in the tightest of gloves, and refusing to be divorced from the crush-hat which bears upon its deftly exposed blue silk lining the legend of the coronet, his little feet in the most pointed of patent-leather shoes—trips after his betrothed with the fidelity of the traditional spaniel; but his eyes!—his small, incisive, narrow, Gallic eyes—their expression was something truly appalling in its ferocious purposefulness.

What were those eyes beholding, in imagination, that could give to them such a fixed, portentous glare?

It has often been remarked that, could we but see ourselves as others see us, we should be somewhat amazed; and, perchance, in no case might this have been more emphatically true than with the respected William Peck—a plain, awkward, gaunt, self-made man—could he have known the light in which his future son-in-law regarded him.

Bending obsequiously over the inclinations of his fiancée toward the plate full of salad which he gracefully held before her, M. de Vervens beheld in Mr. Drummond-Peck the surest, quickest, safest route to Cannes, Nice, and Monaco that it had ever been his good fortune to obtain tickets by!

"This salad is so nice, dear Léonce," murmured Ida; "do try some of it."

Léonce shrugged his little shoulders, whilst an expression of salad-wearied boredom swept over his pallid little face.

Ma chère, the *salade*—I cannot—except with my *déjeuner*—*que voulez vous?* the habit—I cannot."

"Is that so?" returns the bride-elect, commiseratingly, and laying her fork in the plate with amiable alacrity.

"That is so. You dance now, eh?"

"Shall we?" with delight.

"Oh yes. There is nothing else, I am sure—" And so they float off together, respectively envied, it is safe to say, by half the men and women in the room.

A fine, honest, sincere, commonplace young American girl, with a million or two in her own right, and a disreputable, dishonorable, tricky, worn-out little foreign gentleman.

Both happy?

Supremely.

Each in obtaining precisely what each most desires—money, and a title.

Mrs. Rose eyes the pair with an air of supreme complacency; she is disposed to regard them as rather of a *chef d'œuvre* in her line, and is correspondingly uplifted at the social significance of an event that, but for her, could certainly never have occurred. Let him who ventures to insinuate that the sweet little nobleman, so enthusiastic, so ingenuous, so highly born, had seriously compacted with the equally disinterested, highly-connected, and bland Mrs. M. Roosevelt Rose for a stipulated sum—to be paid down a month from his marriage-day with William Peck's elder daughter—hide his diminished and ignoble head.

"Have you congratulated de Vervens, Mr. Stuart?" she cries lightly to Moray as he approaches her.

"By all means. Lucky fellow!"

"You are not dancing to-night; what is the trouble?"

"I assure you I have, though."

"But not once with Miss Peale—ah, speak of the angels!" turning, as Louise slowly passes them, chatting with Mrs. Od-lorne.

"What is that, Mrs. Rose? Did I not hear my name?"

"You did, my dear. I was just asking our Prince Charming, here, why it was that you had not accorded him one dance so far to-night." Mrs. Rose's light eyes—those small, light eyes that seem lidless when they are open—rest upon the pale, pure face of the woman before her, with a glance as keen as only such eyes can give.

"I think," she answers, in her low, musical tones, "that I have not refused to dance with Mr. Stuart."

She is sweeping away, with Drusilla, a little bewildered, at her side, when Moray's voice reaches her—his fullest, sweetest note :

"Will you give me this waltz, Miss Peale?"

She turns around and looks at him from head to foot. Jer-riss Redlon sees her as he hastens to her with an ice in his hand.

"Yes—I will," she says, while her large eyes meet his in a gaze to the full as frank and leisurely as his own.

So they are together—his arms about her, his cheek near to hers, his breath upon her forehead ; and people watching say, "What a superb-looking pair they are! I wonder if that will be the next announcement!" And the chaperones sitting in the alcoves, with their perpetual champagne and oysters, wave their heads sagaciously back and forth over this new possible romance, until they see Mr. Stuart and Miss Peale pass out of the heated ball-room to the cool freshness of the gardens beyond.

Jack and Nina have wandered to the upper summer-house.

"Now!" cries he, "do rest just for a little bit," seating himself on the table before her, and gazing at her as she sits in the soft ethereal light of the green lanterns, as lovely and intangible as some spirit.

"My little woman," murmurs Jack, fetching a big sigh, "how beautiful you are! And you are carrying my fan, aren't you Bless you!"

"To be sure—it is a perfect match. Oh, by the way, Mr. Van Cortland—"

"No!" interrupts the gentleman addressed, in a small, coax-

ing voice, "not that; couldn't you just say 'Jack' once, please?"

"No, certainly not."

"But, Nina—I—" standing in front of her with tightly folded arms a moment, and then kneeling as before a worshipped shrine, and putting up pleading arms in an endeavor to encircle her slight, small body—"I—it is so hard to wait. I've tried to be good and patient—but—don't you think that—you could decide about me to-night?"

She looks at him and sighs, and is silent.

What will you? There are such women to-day, the very daughters of the hour, perhaps not a few; women who play with their own happiness to the full as mercilessly as with that of the men who love them.

"Nina—" murmurs he tenderly, reverently.

"In—in a week," Miss Winthrop says, with a slow little smile, albeit her cheeks are white and her eyes tremulous with a new, sudden brightness.

He fetches a deep sigh as he rises and turns away.

"I am very cold—Jack!"

"Are you, darling?" turning to her again quickly. "Must we go in?—or better, let me go to the house and get you another wrapping; I can easily find Anne, and be back in two minutes."

"Could you? Wouldn't you mind?"

"Mind! the idea! You won't stir until I come?"

"Oh no."

She does not move, but stays quietly gazing at the loveliness of the scene that lies before her eyes—the long, sloping stretch of the Winhurst lands lighted even down to the lake's edge with the pallid green of the lanterns; the water shimmering under a sky full of brilliant stars; Moray Stuart's sail-boat sidling at its mooring at the end of the long tumble-down pier that juts out in front of his house—and—hark! Moray Stuart's voice? Yes, surely, mingling with Louise Peale's indistinctly; more fluent; near, and nearer; footsteps beneath on the lower floor of the summer-house, which is picturesquely built in the cleft of a terraced side-hill, and his tread pacing back and forth quickly.

"Marry, then; marry!" ejaculates Mr. Stuart, with an impatient, almost petulant emphasis.

"Marry!" echoes the woman's voice, in a tone half of horror, half of amazement.

"Yes, certainly; why not?"—matter-of-factly, and with a little cynical laugh. "I give you leave."

"There is something required other than your permission, Moray Stuart." The young actress's words escape her lips with an effort that must be cruel, from its bitter repression and enforced calm.

"And what is that, pray? for I assure you, not even that is in the smallest degree necessary,"—jocularly.

"My—honor—as—a—woman;" the sentence flutters from her shamed mouth in a whisper.

"Ha! ha! ha!" Prince Charming laughs one of his readiest, heartiest peals, smoothing out his disturbed countenance thereafter with his broad, strong fingers carefully. And then he inquires interestedly and kindly enough: "What—do you mean, Miss Peale, may I ask?"

"What do I mean?" she repeats, with a slow, surprised scorn. "I mean that I am your wife, and therefore cannot become the wife of another man any more than you can become the husband of another woman."

"Aha! that is your game, is it?" he exclaims, fiercely. "But—just one moment, Miss Peale, or Miss Rogers, or whatever else you choose to call yourself—you are not my wife; you never were my wife; you are free to marry whom you please—and—so am I." In these last three words Prince Charming very successfully contrives to exemplify a condensation of that latent force which may presumably have descended to him from his paternal ancestry: his lips are like the uncompromising chisel that beats the stone into the shape it must and shall assume.

The girl he speaks to stands apparently stunned by the blow—at all events, silent.

"Come," resumes Mr. Moray Stuart, in a rather more cheerful and reassuring tone—"Come, now, Miss Peale; really, you know, the ladies of your profession are not usually over-particular with regard to their—"

"Silence!" she cries, between her shut, tense lips. "Not a

word against the women of the profession I am about to enter. If there are unfortunate and reckless women in it, it is not for men of your calibre to remind me of it."

"You do veritably love Redlon, then?" The Prince makes the inquiry in a tone of genuine and disinterested curiosity.

"I—love—him"—painfully.

"Then—marry him—if you can."

"—Too well to make of—his wife—a bigamist."

"Bigamist?" with a light, short laugh. "My good girl—really, now"—confidentially—"you were never married to me."

Nina Winthrop, above, gasps as she murmurs "Fiend!" under her breath, hearing the woman in the room below her catch at the frail rustic table for support, where she stands at bay.

"Never," continues Mr. Stuart, in a brisk, conversational way. "It was a mock-marriage, arranged to meet any possible scruples on your part—scruples which, I dare say"—his thin voice grows momentarily lower and harsher—"by this time you have quite overcome. You are entirely free to marry without committing bigamy; so am I. Do you understand?"

There is an inarticulate murmur, something between the cry of a wounded animal and the sob of a dying soul, from the woman to whom he speaks.

"Not another word! not a syllable! Do you hear? If you attempt to thwart my intended marriage with Miss Winthrop by any absurd story of desiring to save her from doing an unconscious wrong—your plea just now, I believe—I will brand your infamy abroad; and my story—the truth, as I see fit to tell it—will be credited—can be proved."

"Oh God!" It is a wild, bitter wail.

"Hush!" the man says, in a whisper, as he attempts to steady her with the grip of his stone-cutter hand. "Don't be a fool—"

She leans against the table and stares at him with wide-open, meaningless eyes.

"There: you're all right now. Good-evening." And he goes to the house, unheeding the surety that she must fall to the ground an instant later with a dull, insensate thud.

Nina springs to her feet, and, quivering, darts to the top of the little winding staircase.

"Ah, my dear—alone?" exclaims Mrs. Rose. "Surely I heard

the tones of our dear Prince's voice and Miss Peale's in here with you. Have they vanished down some secret trap-door like the lovers in the pantomime, or what has become of them?"

For once Mrs. Roosevelt Rose's command of language stood some one else in good stead beside her estimable self.

"Mr. Stuart and Miss Peale were in the lower summer-house," Nina answers slowly. "I just caught a dissolving glimpse of the Prince's figure now, as I was watching for Mr. Van Cortland to return with another wrap for me. I think he went toward the house. Did you want him, Mrs. Rose?"

"I? Oh dear no, my dear; by no means! I am supposed to be chaperoning my lovers, but I have let them wander out of my sight for a few moments. I fancied I heard—quarrelling, my dear—high words. I was really alarmed. I hope—I trust that the Prince and our lovely actress have not—"

"Not what?" Miss Winthrop inquires point-blankly.

"Oh, nothing, my dear; nothing. Here comes Mr. Van Cortland now."

"Ah, yes; and really it is much too damp and cool to stop out here any longer. Thank you very much," as Jack adjusts her cloak. "Mrs. Rose, dear, you are horribly imprudent; do allow Mr. Van Cortland to put my other wrap about your shoulders."

And so they proceed to the ball-room, laughing, chatting, and all the while the question echoing over and over in the younger woman's brain, of how much or how little the older woman has overheard.

As soon as Miss Winthrop had seen Mrs. Rose comfortably seated between her lovers, whilst the one talked enthusiastically in one ear, and the other contracted his blasé little eyes in a general, dilatory stare over the *mise-en-scène*, she slipped out of the ball-room, crossed the vestibule leading to the piazza, and there almost stumbléd, in her eager haste, over Moray Stuart.

"Are you just going out, Miss Nina? You really have not, I suppose, had a chance yet to see how beautiful the gardens look in their weird green lights. It is exquisite below at the summer-house. Won't you let me take you down there just for a few moments—away from all this?" glancing in at the crush and brilliance of the dance.

She looks at him, a light in her eyes that he has never seen there before—so tender, so appealing, so full of warmth and splendor, as makes his heart stand still, and his thin lips quiver, and his light eyes swim.

"Not—not just now," murmurs Miss Winthrop. "I have something necessary to attend to for a few moments. When I—when I come back—"

"Will you waltz with me—then?"

"Yes," lifting her white lowered lids once more to show him those gray eyes full of heaven. "Go into the ball-room and wait for me—please."

Miss Winthrop flies down the dimmest path she can find, and in a few instants she has reached the lower summer-house. It is empty!

She returns slowly to the house, thinking all the while intently of a certain conversation which had occurred some little time ago between Louise Peale, Mrs. Odlorne, Jerriess Redlon, and herself, and during which the journalist had propounded to her this question: "Suppose, for example, that your immaculate friend, our as yet unseen Prince, should have, somewhere in the dim past, played with and thrown over some true woman's heart; would you—what would you do?"

CHAPTER FOURTEENTH.

THE ball was over; the music hushed; the lights were put out; the flowers faded; and the feet of the dancers at rest.

Toward the close of the evening a great many people—Mrs. Rose most kindly and persistently—had inquired for Miss Peale, who had disappeared; but Miss Winthrop met these queries with the very natural response that Miss Peale had gone to her room for very needed rest, in view of the arduous event that was only some three days away now.

Miss Peale, being of a most considerate disposition, had bidden her faithful Gerton seek her couch and not sit up for her until the small hours of a ball's closing. Nina had done the same by

Anne; but this diligent creature had disobeyed orders, and was with difficulty ordered to her room, after having partially assisted her young mistress with her toilette.

Nina closed the door herself after Anne; she listened to the lessening echo of her footsteps, opened the door, and peered out.

The lamp in the lower hall lighted the upper one but very dimly; so she picked up a candle, and with her fallen hair floating down her back, and in her little wrapper, she flew across the long narrow passage leading to Miss Peale's rooms.

She knocked: there was no reply; she had scarcely expected one. She gently turned the knob; it yielded to the pressure; and entering, she saw the fire burning low, the lamp and candles flaring high, the bed untouched, the rooms both empty and bare of a trace of even a recent presence. Miss Peale's dressing-gown hung over the back of a chair before the hearth, and her toilette slippers were toasting on the hassock.

This was all—save the ticking of the clock above the mantel, and the slant, cold ray of the approaching dawn that peeped in at the parted curtains.

Nina shuddered as, instinctively and unconsciously, she crossed to the window and glanced out. She looked toward Wastelands, and a sudden inspiration seemed to take possession of her. She felt assured that if Louise Peale lived she should find her at Wastelands—perhaps very near the water, or lying blinded, half dead, on the rough stones of the rotten pier.

In a flash everything rushed through her quick brain, and she decided that she herself, and she alone, must seek to prove the truth of her impression, must, before the coming of the broad and tell-tale daylight, find her friend and get her back to Winthurst—to the safe warmth and shelter of this very room—ere prying eyes and busy tongues could have chance to note a young woman in a ball-dress being driven along the high-road at four o'clock in the morning in a pony phaeton—for this Nina felt to be the only means at her command. Hastily and noiselessly closing the door of Louise's room, and revolving how best she could get the ponies harnessed—whether to take Poole into her confidence, or to make use of her own private key to the stable, and her own thorough knowledge of how to harness her favorites—Miss Winthrop tripped over a rug and al-

most fell, dropping her candle and putting it out as she did so.

In an instant a door opened—the door of Mr. Van Cortland's room. Jack was yet in his evening dress, and had been pacing up and down his apartment for the last half hour, indulging in a mental computation of how many hours and minutes the ordinary week contained.

"Hello !" he exclaimed, distinguishing a figure—that of the possible burglar—and unable to make out whose it was ; " what's up ?"

" I am," returns Miss Winthrop, in a small, hushed voice.

" God bless my soul !" cries he ; " is anything the matter ?"

" Yes."

" What is it—tell me, can you ?"

" Will you do something for me ?" she asks, taking advantage of this unlooked-for interposition of providence—for her friend, and her friend alone, is in Nina Winthrop's mind and heart this hour.

" Will I not ?" cries he, agitated, yet quieted by the intensity of the girl's manner.

" Will you take the key to the stable—you know where it hangs, under the stag's horns in the lower hall—and harness Poppet and Peacock to the covered phaeton—mind, the covered one—and bring them around to the lower gate—not to the house ?"

" Now ?" he asks, aghast.

" Now ; as fast as you possibly can. Oh—go, go !" pleads she, almost tearfully. " There is not a moment to be lost."

Jack starts down the stairs without another word. Presently she hears his quick footstep on the gravel, and by the time that she has twisted up her hair, buttoned a Newmarket over her wrapper, put on a soft hat, and gathered together half-a-dozen shawls and wrappings, she can discern with strained ear the flying hoofs of the ponies, going swiftly to the designated lower gate.

In two minutes Nina meets Jack at the wide entrance to Winhurst. The last stars are winking sleepy eyes at the east, that already is showing its rose to the sombreness of the opposite horizon.

She gets in, and he prepares to follow her,

"Oh no," she whispers—"you—I thank you so much, but—"

"You are not asking me to let you go out alone at this time of night—or day, whichever it is!" he exclaims hotly.

"You cannot come with me," she returns hurriedly, putting out a warning little cold hand, which he seizes in both of his.

"But, Nina, my child—whatever is it—"

"Listen," she says, bending her head: "it is the life, the hope, the all of a human being—"

And then she looks up at his troubled, anxious, eager face, and a great wave of color rushes to her cheeks, and a great flood of yearning tenderness rushes over her heart, as dimly—even in this hapless, hurried hour—Nina's instinct foreshadows the cruel days that are about to dawn for the man who is looking at her so wistfully.

"Oh, Jack!" murmurs she brokenly.

"My little one!"

"Oh, Jack! promise me, promise me one thing?" The tense, strained pathos of her voice frightens him.

"Anything, my darling."

"Promise me—whatever I do—no matter what!—have faith in me."

"Always," he says.

A simple, single word; but it answers Nina Winthrop as no thousands of other words long drawn out in fine assurance could.

She touches Poppet with the whip, and in another moment is lost to his sight in a bend of the road. But, nevertheless, Mr. Van Cortland does not re-enter the house: too loyal a man to spy upon her goal, too loyal a lover to rest when she is in trouble, he simply wanders up and down the shadiest pathways, waiting for the moment when he shall once more hear the ponies' welcome trot along the gravel.

It does not take Nina ten minutes to accomplish the distance between Winhurst and Wastelands; she drives past the gloomy, shadowed house with a shudder—the very morning seems to shun it, for, although the road before her lies in the growing light, a heavy, dank mist shrouds the limply-hanging gate and crawls slimily over the thick bushes that shield the path from sight. She draws rein near the swamp, and, alighting, ties the

ponies to one of the low stumps guarding the forlorn old bridge, and then, shivering in every limb, for the dews are cold and the breath of the October dawn is keen, and, beside, what may she not find awaiting her at the pier or in the water?—a Something blind, and deaf, and dumb, and colder far than dew or dawn.

Under the elder-bushes and the lilac-trees, and the thick tangle of the wild grape-vines and the clematis, she threads her way down the pier to the clear part that juts into the water: there is nothing, no one, here—or there, where lies the lake, calm, unruffled, and placid, as it reflects the first faint color of the new-born day upon its waveless bosom; yonder Mr. Stuart's boat rocks softly in the whispering breeze. She hears the little ripples break upon the bit of pebbly beach; she hears the birds twittering those first sweet matins of the day; but this is all—Louise Peale is not here.

Nina turns quickly back; without pausing to take breath, or to note the inquiring eyes of Poppet and Peacock as she swiftly passes them, she climbs the rise beyond the swamp, pushes back the broken wicket, rushes up the wet and soggy path—to find, lying across the stone doorstep of his house, the woman whom she seeks.

"Louise, Louise!" whispers she agonizedly, as she bends over her and tries to raise the lovely, low-lying head upon her knee.

The eyes open—but not to consciousness; the lips part, but not to speak; and Nina, terrified, almost thinks that she will at this last moment have to give up her purpose, rouse the people of the house, and make known that which she would give her right hand to conceal.

She wraps the cloaks about Louise, and speeds back for the phaeton, lamenting her lack of foresight in not having driven up to the house instead of walked. When she returns, it is well-nigh broad daylight. For a moment she pauses, and the hot tears force themselves from her eyes.

Then, with a superhuman effort, she half drags, half carries the stupefied girl down the path and out to the phaeton, and places her in it as best she can. She covers the drabbed finery of the yellow ball-dress and the shine of the jewels that lie in

the lustre of her golden hair, and, putting whip to the ponies, is off.

In less than ten minutes more, Jack Van Cortland hears the light hoofs tearing up the avenue—and—waits.

Miss Winthrop succeeds in getting the now half-thawed but still unconscious woman not only into the house, but up the staircase and within the safety of her own rooms.

She rushes down to drive the horses back to the stable—and sees him already half-way there, his white, drawn face just touched with the light of the newly-risen sun as he glances backward.

It is ten o'clock when Miss Winthrop enters the breakfast-room that morning; she finds Mrs. Odlorne presiding over tea, coffee, sugar, and cream, in the best of spirits, with Mr. Stuart in a newly drawn-up chair at her side, and Jerriss toying with his fruit.

Moray rises.

"I have come in from my walk earlier than usual, expressly to see how you are after the excitement of the dance last night," he says.

She bows.

"Of course, I breakfasted hours ago; but my good, gentle friend here insisted that I must make one with you, and I am sure that I could not refuse!"

"That is right," she says simply, taking her seat as he moves the chair for her.

"And how are you?" anxiously, and in a tone that is lowered just a trifle, as he bends upon her face the full glance of his intelligent and most coldly chaste eyes.

"Very well—and you?"

"Never better—although you did not come back to the ball-room and give me my waltz, or yet permit me to go with you down to the summer-house."

Nina laughs a slow little, rather amused laugh.

"No, I didn't—did I? that is true," looking up at him archly—"but there are other nights yet in October, and perhaps as fair as last—who knows?"

"I do," murmurs he faintly, while his regular, imperturbable face flushes up to the line of his handsome wavy brown hair.

"Where's Miss Peale?" cries Mrs. Odlorne, voicing the question Jerriss Redlon's eyes have been asking ever since Miss Winthrop entered the room.

"Louise?" replies Nina, carelessly; "oh, she is rather tired, I believe. Gerton will carry up her coffee to her room."

"Ah, very well. Dear me!" sighs Drusilla, with uplifted eyes and hands; "I should think that that girl would be able neither to eat or sleep between this Friday and next Monday. What an ordeal!"

"Ah, my dear Mrs. Odlorne," remarks the Prince, blandly, "you are by far and away too sympathetic; you—"

"I know I am! I know and realize it," interrupts Drusilla, with another sigh. "My poor dear Peter, while he far, very far from comprehended me, still always maintained that my sympathies were too large for my frail, small frame."

"Precisely," concurs the Prince, without a suspicion of even a sidelong glance at the little widow's very unfrail proportions. "Women who gravitate toward a theatrical career are usually endowed with a superabundance of vitality, it seems to me, and a courage that surmounts almost any difficulty," he continues.

"You are correct, I am sure," exclaims Miss Winthrop, warmly.

"Endorsed!" cries Jerriss, who has gotten into the habit, through long walks full of intellectual sympathy, of finding himself agreeing with most of the handsome Prince's propositions.

"Miss Peale is certainly not lacking in pluck," proceeds Stuart thoughtfully, balancing a knife-blade on a tumbler—relic of that barbarism which no doubt caused his grandfather to eat with a blade, and to ignore the use of a napkin to the substitution of a convenient coat-sleeve. Strange survival of ancestry, which causes some otherwise well-bred persons to busy themselves with a handling of inoffensive table-furniture!

"Pluck!" echoes the journalist. "She is as full of courage as woman can be."

"And with genius and ability to support it!" cries Nina.

The Prince shrugs his shoulders as he lays down the knife.

"I am not so sure of that, either, my dear Moray!" answers Mrs. Odlorne to this dissenting gesture of her favorite's.

"We shall soon know," Nina says gayly. "We have not long to wait now, to find out whether Louise is about to commit the crowning blunder of her life—or the culminating success."

"True!" Moray says.

"She will succeed. But now, when it is too late, I sincerely wish that she were to make her *début* in any play rather than one of mine!" Redlon speaks earnestly.

"Don't worry, my dear fellow," cries the other man; "you're bound to come out all right. I have, for one, a great deal more faith in your play than in Miss Peale's histrionic ability—although," he adds reflectively, "that is not small."

"Nina," exclaims Mrs. Odlorne, who begins to weary of the subject under discussion, "where is Mr. Van Cortland?"

"Am I my brother's keeper?" replies her niece, with a smile.

Moray looks at her, and she meets his glance as she utters the fraternal word.

"Now; that is my fault," Jerriss hastens to say. "I knocked at Jack's door this morning, and he asked me to say that he wished no breakfast, but would put in a prompt appearance for luncheon—tired out, or some such thing, I believe. I ask his pardon for forgetting his message; I evidently was not cut out for a Mercury."

"He shall have his coffee, poor fellow! Danced too much, I dare say."

"Some men, my dear Mrs. Odlorne," says the Prince, "can't stand even a dance too many; it is all the result of the mode of life—entirely their own fault, and quite as equally within the scope of their own power to remedy—"

"Or elude it," amends Miss Winthrop.

"If you prefer the word. I have very little patience with a man who ever permits himself to be done out; if I can sit up all night on an occasion, and appear as usual the next morning, so can another if he chooses—"

"To employ your methods," finishes Nina.

"What are your methods, Moray?" asks Drusilla, anxiously, as she scrutinizes the unlined, calm, and handsome face of the man at her side.

"It is only one, my dear friend. Any student of beauty—and by beauty I mean the best view possible of any human

being's countenance: that is for them beauty—will tell you that emotion, the display of emotion, has lined more faces than Time has ever furrowed."

"Then," Jerriss says, "my dear man, what do you recommend for us to do with these objectionable ingredients of the average human being?"

"Control them," the other returns, drawing in his flexible lips to a thinner line even than their wont.

"But suppose one can't control them! Suppose one is all soul and sympathy and emotion and feeling, what then?" queries Drusilla, helpless before this, to her, impossible prescription.

"Then," Prince Charming says, with the air of one issuing a fiat, "one must grow old—before one's time."

"Can you control all yours?" Nina inquires, half dreamily, as she looks out of the window toward the terraces, where the sun shines on the peaked roof of the summer-house.

"Almost."

"Well, I pity her; indeed I do!" The plump little widow has returned to first principles.

"Why?" inquires Stuart, lazily.

"Oh, the whole thing—and her dear five hundred friends most of all. Well! I can only pray for her. Will you go to church to-morrow, dear friend? You have not been with us once since you came to Lenox!"

"Church—I! My dear Mrs. Odlorne, I always go to church; every day of my life."

"Prince!" reproachfully.

"I do," asserts he. "Do I not each day tread the beautiful earth? do I not inhale the fragrance of flowers, the pungent odors of root, grass, trees? do I not revel in the sunshine on the waters, in the shadows that chase one another up and down the beautiful hill-slopes? do I not worship, as I cast my eyes upward to the blue and arching dome above me,—do I not worship—Nature?"

"Oh,—in mercy spare us!" cries Miss Winthrop, with a wearied uplifting of her dark brows. "Do, for a change, let me hear one man say that he worships Art. Nature seems to be



the universal idol. I am surprised, Moray, that you can submit to being so perfectly commonplace."

He willingly overlooks the persiflage for the sake of the Christian name.

"Don't you know," laughs he in return, "that a man must make some show of congeniality and sympathy with his fellows, else—" with a serio-smile and shrug.

"I understand perfectly! perfectly!" exclaims Drusilla, with warmth. "And I think the Prince is quite correct—quite. When one remembers how very different your character and attainments, your tastes and pursuits are, Moray, from those of the average man, one cannot blame you in the least for taking refuge in a general platitude which serves to place you on the—" The little widow pauses, having somewhat overdrawn her verbal stock-in-hand; but Jerriss jumps into the breach:

"To place him on the line, eh, my dear Mrs. Odlorne?"

"Exactly—exactly!"

"In other matters, I presume, the dear fellow is—'skied' completely, eh?" queries Miss Winthrop, slowly.

Stuart laughs; as does the journalist.

"I dare say I am," Moray assents. "I make no doubt most men would regard my mode of life, my habits, thoughts, ideas, and aspirations, as transcendental, if not quite heavenly!"

"I think them entirely heavenly!" cries Drusilla, lifting her orbs to the frescoed ceiling. "But then," with conclusive solemnity, "I know you."

"Indeed you do," he says, "for you are a woman. No man could either know or understand me—"

"Hello! hello!" interrupts Jerriss, who has risen and walked to the window. "What's that?"

"I repeat," the Prince says, with vivacity: "no man could comprehend me."

"Why not?" inquires the little widow, with her solid quality of reducing ideas to sound English.

"Because there is that subtle quality of intuition about a woman which not one man in a thousand possesses, and which would inform her that I could appreciate and value her as no other man, perhaps, could or would."

"Oh!" Mrs. Odlorne sighs, gaspingly.

Jerriss laughs. "Stuart, old fellow," he says, *sotto voce*, "upon my soul, I don't wonder that you've made such a success of it, always, with the *beau sexe*!"

Moray smiles.

"Why?"

"Oh, you've such a deucedly neat way of flattering them, don't you know, and at the same time putting in such an awfully clever word for yourself."

The Prince laughs a little, as he imitates Miss Winthrop's example and quits the breakfast-table.

Nina has gone out on the piazza, whither the men have followed her—Mr. Redlon with a cigar, after asking permission.

"Let me see," she murmurs, turning languid eyes up to Moray Stuart's face, as he stands leaning against the balustrade before her, calm, patient, fresh, in the morning sunshine, *toujours avec cette figure d'ange*.

"Yes?" listening.

"Was it not you whom I defrauded of a little walk down to the summer-house last evening?"

"It was I."

"I thought so." She has glanced away from him, but looks back again at his face.

He is a man so clever as to always infallibly interpret a woman's wish, whim, mood, or mind correctly; and not only this, but to leave it uninterpreted when he should, and only to translate when it must prove agreeable.

There is, therefore, not any need of words between them; he goes straight into the house, fetches her hat and coat from the rack, and his own Derby, and, after she is duly attired, they saunter off down the winding paths, until they reach the upper story of the rustic shelter.

"How perfect the view is!—so clear, so limpid! I can see the farthest hills as sharply defined as the nearest."

"It is an ideal day; the atmosphere not too warm for—"

"Friendship," finishes she, musingly.

"Nor too cold for passion;" he speaks rapidly.

"Suppose we go below, downstairs," Miss Winthrop says, making a movement toward rising from the seat she has taken,

and looking up at him with lustrous, innocent eyes. "Shall we?"

"No." Moray Stuart's voice is almost rough in its impatient intonation.

"But why not?" wonderingly. "The view from the lower floor is very much prettier than from here; don't you think so?" drawing the honeysuckle spray, with its last ragged blossoms, close to her red, soft mouth.

"I don't know—oh, Nina! my soul! my life! won't you have just a little pity on me?" His voice is hoarse with an entreaty and an intensity that have furrowed deep lines of pain and passion in a face that has shown smoothly enough, so far, to the world.

"Not a bit," laughs she, tossing away the piece of vine in her hand, and staring at him in no apparent displeasure.

"I am a fool—and worse," cries he, under his breath—"to ask for what I do not want. I want no pity—I want you."

"I had thought so," a bit reproachfully.

He looks at her with a glare and light in his famished, cold eyes, such as might flash in the sockets of a starved tiger who saw meat just outside the bars of his cage.

"Well?" Miss Winthrop utters the monosyllable in a pleasant conversational way.

"Well," he echoes, with as near an approach to rage as could contrive to creep into those mellow notes in her presence.

And then Nina laughs—a low peal of musical mirth, that, after all said and done, jars a bit on the pure air of the morning.

He stooped forward; his flushed face was so near to hers that she felt the warmth of it—and then she held out her hand. He took it.

It was her mood, her way, her fashion; and Prince Charming was too wise a man to seek to alter it by one jot.

"You will be my wife?" he says presently, his words tremulous with a madness of joy that he has never known before—and with the intoxication that worships pleasure in just and due proportion to the danger that attends it.

"I will promise to be your wife," she says, while her large eyes dilate and her heart palpitates beneath the soft folds of her dainty gown.

He has her hand in both of his; her fair, fragile little hand between his brawny palms; he is looking down at her, and his lips are drawn in to a thread in breadth, while she can hear his pulses throb.

He bends a little nearer, making a motion to kiss her.

She shakes her head, slowly and without visible shrinking—and he is, at this crisis also, clever enough to refrain.

It stands him in good stead—that theory of life of his—just now.

“I may speak to Mrs. Odlorne?”

She inclines her head.

“And I may announce—our engagement?”

She bows her head again, meditatively, serenely.

“At once?” eagerly.

“At once.” She turns her head away.

“Oh, God!” cries he, turning away too. “What a woman you are to scorch and freeze a man in one breath!”

“What will you? I am the woman whom you say you want.”

“Want—want,” he whispers, between his strong teeth. “For the sake of the God you worship and call merciful, touch me—lay your hand upon mine—just for an instant, and remember you have promised to be, my wife!”

She puts out her hand to where his grips the rough edge of the rustic table, and she lays one finger lightly on it for a moment.

“Will you do something for me?” she asks, as she watches the unbidden color flash into and forsake his handsome face.

“Anything!”

“Then just leave me here alone for a little while, please.”

He has recovered himself, and does as he is asked to do.

CHAPTER FIFTEENTH.

It is to be remembered that Nina had spent two hours and more—the hours between five and eight o'clock that morning after the ball—in Louise's room. She had, after locking the door, succeeded in undressing the apparently stupefied girl, in getting her into bed, and in pouring some brandy—swiftly brought from the buffet in the dining-room before any of the servants had as yet invaded that apartment—down her throat.

Finally Louise awoke to a half-dazed consciousness, and listened to the brief recital that Nina had already rehearsed so many times in her own mind as she had bent over her friend, as to be perfect in when the moment came for giving it voice.

"My dear child! you must have fainted entirely away. I missed you from the ball-room at the close of the evening, and fancied you had gone up, worn out with fatigue and with the thought of all that lay before you. When I came to bed myself, I ran over just for a few moments' chat, and stumbled over you lying there."

"Where?"

"Oh—just by your door."

"Ah!"

"I thought I would not call any one, so I just dragged you in as best I could; and now you will be quite yourself in no time."

"Yes—but—the water—the long walk, the—" murmurs Louise, confusedly, pressing her hands to her head.

"Nonsense, dear; you've been dreaming. Now I shall call Gerton to you."

"What time is it?"

"Oh, it's quite well on toward breakfast, I imagine; but you must not think of getting up."

Miss Peale sighs, and turns her face aside.

"I don't understand—" she cries brokenly.

"Of course you don't, dear; neither could any one who had lain for so long in a dead faint, with no one to look after them. I shall never forgive myself for not coming up at once when I missed you."

Louise raises herself from the pillows and sits up straightly, catching a glimpse of herself in the opposite mirror; as she does so, she shudders.

"You are cold?"

"No—I—" She laughs and cries hysterically. "Don't mind me, dear; I have had a strange vision—I—"

"There, there," murmurs Nina, soothingly. "Try to quiet yourself, dear; remember all that lies before you in the next forty-eight hours or so. This is Saturday morning, Lou; and on Monday night you will make Jerriss famous, and yourself too."

The actress smiles through her tears—a wan little smile that smites the soul of the other woman with a sharp pang.

"Where did you say you found me, Nina?"

"Just there, on the threshold."

"And how long must I have been there?"

"Two hours, at the least."

"My hair is wet!" she exclaims, running her fingers through the short, bright curls.

"I doubt not it is," laughs Miss Winthrop. "I dashed water all over you, and just ruined your gown."

"Ah, well, no matter; I should never care to wear it again, anyway."

"Fortunate! Now, dear, I must go; and recollect, you are to lie perfectly still until I come to give permission for you to rise. Do you hear?"

"I wish I could remember how I got to—to—the door of this room."

"Oh, you will after a while; you are stunned now: the heat and excitement, and—"

"What excitement?" sharply.

"Why," innocently, "the excitement of your appearance on day after to-morrow night."

"Oh yes, yes; to be sure. I had for—of course—how stupid I am!"

"You need sleep."

Nina presses a little kiss on Louise's forehead, and leaves her.

In the opinion of both Mr. Moray Stuart and Mr. Jack Van

Cortland, Saturday was an entirely lost and most unprofitable portion of time ; neither of them saw anything whatever of Miss Winthrop, who averred her presence as necessary to Miss Peale up to the very moment when that young lady should set out, accompanied by the faithful Gerton, for town.

When, finally, they had assisted at the send-off of the young actress with a show more or less of amiable friendliness, both of them uttered sighs, not loud but very deep, of internal thanksgiving, swiftly followed by hopes that the evening would afford them some rather more tangible evidence of the existence of a Miss Winthrop than the simple knowledge that they were in the same house with her.

These very natural and, in the case of Prince Charming, certainly most legitimate aspirations were destined to non-fulfilment. Nina quitted the dining-room almost at once after dinner, and presumably went upstairs.

Jack intercepted her on the landing by virtue of a lately-acquired acquaintance with the back staircase.

"Am I never to see you again?" murmurs he, catching at the little cold hands that somehow contrive to elude his clasp.

"Do you not see me now?" she smiles, glancing rather away from him.

"I suppose I do; but it looks very much as if it were to be only a dissolving view."

"That's all," she returns lightly.

"Aren't you going down again this evening?"

"I think not."

"Oh, Nina! Not ten minutes with you yesterday, or last night, or to day; and I have been counting the hours all day long until Miss Peale should be safely speeded on her journey—and now—"

"I am weary," she pleads, and not either untruthfully or in vain.

"I am a brute! Your dear eyes are tired and you are pale. Little one, forgive me. I had forgotten the strain there has been put upon you—I—there, good-night; God bless you!"

He stoops his tall head and lays his lips reverentially upon her hand.

"Good-night," she says mechanically, and goes to her room.

Mr. Stuart, less fortunate in that he is not afforded the happy chance of encountering his betrothed in a dimly-lighted corridor, makes shift to send her a brief and impassioned appeal in black and white, to which he receives the immediate response, by word of mouth of her faithful Anne, that "Miss Winthrop has all her packing to superintend, and beside is so extremely tired as to necessitate a very early seeking of her couch."

And herewith Mr. Moray Stuart is compelled to content himself, and succeeds therein only to a very limited degree.

It had been planned that Mrs. Odlorne, Miss Winthrop, Jack, Prince Charming, and Anne should not go up to town until Monday morning; but Nina now pleaded for a Sunday train, and carried the day. Jerriss Redlon had gone on Saturday morning in the best of spirits, Nina not having allowed him—or any one else, for that matter—to suspect that Miss Peale's non-appearance at the breakfast-table was due to aught save the usual languor consequent upon a ball.

Four chairs in the drawing-room car Pocahontas: Mr. Moray Stuart, with Mrs. Odlorne on his left and his *fiancée* on his right; and next to her Mr. Jack Van Cortland.

It cannot be truthfully recorded that this journey to New York was deemed a strict success by either of the men, although to Mrs. Drusilla it appeared to afford an opportunity for that species of communication with a fellow-being of the opposite sex, which she called a "soul-talk."

It is safe to say that in the course of the five hours consumed between Lenox village and the Grand Central Station, the little widow had safely and mellifluously launched her entire theory of life, love, religion—it being Sunday, she felt obliged conscientiously to mingle theology with her other enthusiasms—upon the troubled sea of the Prince's mentality.

Meantime, this interesting and thoroughly-courteous gentleman found himself in one of those sinister predicaments which even his diplomatizing ingenuity saw no relief from until the merciful shadow of the station should be reached; he could annihilate neither Mrs. Odlorne or yet Mr. Van Cortland; and so he smiled with his lips and cursed in his heart.

Nina was quiet; she read a novel, answered when she was spoken to, and had no pretty airs of graciousness or sweetness

for either of the men who watched and waited on her lightest word. In fact, Miss Winthrop seemed absorbed in scenery, light romance, and the other passengers of the Pocahontas.

"Such a nice day!" she says, allowing her eyes to meet Jack's for an instant.

"Is it?" responds he, gloomily.

"Of course it is! I only hope to-morrow will be as nice."

"I trust so."

A pause; a station; and Mrs. Odlorne's high note, attuned to the racket of the train, caught in the midst of things, thus:

"—And I believe she loves you! You are just her style; and I hope—"

A falling inflection, suddenly modulated to meet the exigencies of the stop.

Nina smiles; she cannot help it, although her gaze is fastened upon the page before her.

"What is Mrs. Odlorne talking about, anyway?" inquires Jack, irascibly. That any one is in a position to chat as they wish to, and with whom they wish, strikes him, just now, in the light of a pet, personal grievance.

"How should I know?"

"Nina," softly, as the train noisily moves away from the town of Bridgeport.

She moves her head.

"What makes you so hard on a fellow? Have I—have I done anything to—displease you, these last days?"

"No."

"Won't you look at me?" implores he, recklessly twisting the fringes of her wrap in his nervous fingers.

She sighs and raises her eyes; and while still the happy smile of thankfulness parts his lips, the other man, through the sole intervention of a temporary lack of breath on the part of Mrs. Odlorne, turns and bends toward her.

"Are you quite comfortable, Nina?"

"Yes, thank you."

Jack picks up a time-table and studies it with that interest which any convenient literature never fails to awaken at social crises of this particular nature.

"Do you know what I am undergoing?" Stuart asks, drawing in his lips finely.

"No. Am I expected to ask, 'What?'"

"As it is in your creed, I suppose I may be permitted to tell you—hell."

Her lip curls.

From some other man she could have tolerated the word—smiled or frowned it out of hearing or remembrance; from him it merely recalls to her the fact that there is a latent, repulsive something underlying all the splendid, subtle smoothness of his courtly bearing.

"Why do you scorn—my pain?" asks he, vehemently.

"I see no occasion for your pain."

"The occasion for it is simply that I cannot take my own into my arms in a railway carriage." He looks at her with eyes to the full as ferocious as his whispered intonation.

"Oh!" Miss Winthrop shrugs her shoulders deprecatingly.

"Tell me, Nina," bending nearer to her shifting chair, "have you no wish—no want to feel me nearer you than this?"

"And"—her delicate nostrils dilating, her lowered lids tremulous, her parted lips sensitive with the suspicion of a smile, as she recalls a conversation to which she had been an unsuspected listener not so very long ago, Miss Winthrop adds, in a voice that her very heart seems to beat through—"suppose I do—what then?"

"Oh, my soul!" cries he, through his clinched teeth. "Nina, say that you love me—"

"Say that I love you?" with beautiful, uplifted, reproachful eyes. "Why would you have me say it?"

"Oh!" he sighs, with a rapturous, insatiable yearning.

"You are not the man, surely, to care for mere words."

"Perhaps I am not; but—"

"Ah, no 'buts.' Has not Moray Stuart's life taught him to value the act rather than the language? With your subtlety, spirituality, freedom from the vulgar trammels that hamper other men, the knowledge should not only content, but satisfy you—"

"Oh, in your hands what am I?—just the mere wax to mould to your will, even that other men are!"

"Don't flatter me: it is so tiresome!"

"I could not flatter you—"

"Be good and read," she says, offering another novel from her satchel.

"Read! books! when I have your face with its story to feast my sight upon! Oh no."

"What is its story? Come, tell me," closing her own volume with a show of both decision and interest.

"Ah, you have been called capricious, fickle, inconstant; why? Because in turn you have exhausted the capacities of every man who has heretofore loved you. You could hardly continue faithful to an empty shell from which you had extracted every particle of good. Inconstant, you! No; you would be as faithful as ever woman was, to the man who could fulfil your needs, grant your exactions, and comprehend your nature."

She smiles incredulously.

"You are a volcano," he says, leaning back in his chair and gazing at her through his long lashes.

"Do you know I despise long eyelashes on a man," Miss Winthrop replies, with equal relevancy and politeness.

Prince Charming laughs—so heartily as to cause him to thereafter raise his hand to remove any vestiges of this mirth which still might possibly be wrinkling his handsome nose and brow.

"Original child! Of course you do; they are rather effeminate and childish on the whole. Now," he says, bending nearer to her again, "another man—Van Cortland, for instance—would have taken that last little remark of yours very much amiss: I don't; I comprehend you—"

"Do you?" Miss Winthrop says vaguely.

"Of course I do."

"Ah, to be sure! I had quite forgotten that you are the man who understands my sex quite on the wholesale—"

"Nina!" reproachfully.

"Rye!" sings out the brakeman.

"When shall I see you again, Miss Winthrop?" Jack asks meekly, as they pass Larchmont.

"To-morrow evening—half after eight ; the right-hand stage box of the Criterion Theatre."

"Not sooner?"

"Well, I do not see how. I am so tired that, as soon as we reach the hotel, I shall get into my wrapper ; then all day to-morrow I wish to be, must be, with Louise—"

"Ah, I see. Do you know, I have almost come to hate Louise."

"Why?"

"She always, lately, keeps you from me in the most pertinacious way."

"Nonsense!"

And then they roll into the station at last ; enter the carriage ; leave Mrs. Odlorne and Miss Winthrop at the Fifth Avenue ; and presently the two men alight at the Victoria.

Jack consoles himself with a constant mental repetition of Nina's parting answer to some query of the Prince's.

"Ah, I can't see anyone to-morrow ; I shall be with Louise all day, so do not expect it. Until we meet at the Criterion!"

And so she vanishes from his sight.

Both Mr. Van Cortland and Mr. Stuart amuse themselves after the same fashion that Sunday night ; it is by effecting an entrance to a florist's and sending Miss Winthrop flowers.

The Prince chooses violets and orchids ; Jack, a great box of all sorts of roses.

And furthermore, the next morning, before Mr. Van Cortland had either breakfasted or glanced at his pile of daily papers, he invaded another florist's shop and sent another big box of flowers—all sorts of flowers in a great garden-like profusion—to Miss Winthrop, and charming baskets full of Mermets to both Mrs. Odlorne and Miss Peale.

Thereafter Jack turned into Delmonico's, ordered his meal of several courses,—he was a man who rejoiced always in a good, healthy appetite,—picked up a paper, and in a few moments laid it down.

He presently rose, however, leaving his food untasted ; walked out, and crossing to the Hoffman House, entered the sumptuous bar-room and ordered some brandy without water.

Precisely what Jack Van Cortland did with that Monday he

never knew; but it came to an end, and by eight o'clock, as he got into his evening dress, he had an unsubstantial idea that he had not eaten since the day before, and that he had walked the streets of New York for the last ten hours.

CHAPTER SIXTEENTH.

ASSUREDLY, the Criterion Theatre had never held a more distinguished audience, taking it all in all, than that which was assembled within its walls on this particular Monday evening.

A certain proportion of society had, up to the present hour almost, been just a trifle in doubt as to whether Miss Peale would be taken up, or laid forever down, by that other proportion of which she had hitherto formed an admired member, and to whose edict the first-mentioned moiety would hasten to affix its secondary seal as soon as the cue could be taken.

One glance around the house must have been sufficient to assure an *habitué* that the *débutante* had nothing to fear at the hands of her set; and when the rumor went about from loge to loge, and chair to chair, as it presently did, that Mrs. Lovell had asked the new star for supper at her house after the performance, and that Mrs. Wadsworth had invited her to be met by all her old circle on the afternoon of the next day,—although Miss Peale had been compelled to decline both courtesies,—the half whose dictum is final smiled approval of their leaders; and the half that follows the fiat sighed with relief after the suspense and uncertainty, feeling that it could now with perfect propriety indulge in a length and breadth of enthusiasm which the tyrants of fashion seldom aspire to.

The pretty house never looked prettier, with its subdued lights and quaint Moorish trappings of adornment; the programmes each had a fragrant flower stuck in it, and the ushers were resplendent with lily favors.

Forman, looking much more like a literary man or a student than a theatrical manager, in his faultless evening dress, with his quiet, watchful eyes on every part of the front, stood now in

the lobby, now in the foyer, and again in his private room just back of the box-office; whilst Redlon, as nervous as a girl on the occasion of her first ball, wandered from back to front, and could barely be restrained from getting out of the house altogether and repairing to his room at the Brunswick, there to await what he now felt sure, he said, would prove "the failure of his life."

"Cheer up, old fellow; come in here; come, I say!" and Forman took the reluctant playwright by the arm and fairly dragged him into the sanctum.

"I tell you, Dave, it's all up with me. I know it is."

"Don't be a fool!" the young manager says testily. "If it's all up with you, I should like to know what it is with me?"

"I know it," Jerriss replies gloomfully. "You've risked a pot of money on the confounded thing."

"Rather," grimly.

"And Miss Peale—"

"Is as cool and collected as any old stager I ever encountered."

"Dave!" springing up from his chair, "what do you really think about it now—candidly?"

"Nothing at all," replies Mr. Forman, drily.

"On your honor?"

"Just so."

"But you must have some idea?"

"Haven't one. My dear boy, after a man's been in the theatrical business just one year, if he has any common-sense at all, he gets rid of every 'idea,' as you call it, that he ever had before. Now, I've been in a theatre, as you know, seven years, and I've pretty thoroughly learned the lesson that no human being has any more idea or judgment regarding the possible success or non-success of a play than the unborn child—until it's been played."

"I believe I'll go outside," Redlon says, after a pause, during which he has been absently staring at several of Miss Peale's photos which are lying on the desks and tables.

"Sit still," advises Mr. Forman.

"Where are you going?"

"I am going to give Miss Peale her first call—put her on the

stage; and then I'll rejoin you, and we'll smoke the pipe of peace together. Help yourself; here are some capital cigars."

"I can't smoke."

"Try."

"What time is it?"

"After eight."

"How's the house?"

"Superb."

"Are all the fellows in yet?"

"All but the *Mail and Express*."

"Are you going now?"

"Yes."

"I say, what—what the deuce do you usually do with yourself on first nights?"

"What do I do? Well, I sit right there on that leather chair and wait for the verdict."

"After which act?"

"If it's a three-act play, after the second; if it's a five-act play like yours, at the close of the third."

"Shall we know then?"

"Ought to—unless the papers give us trouble to-morrow morning. Ta-ta."

And Mr. Forman, with a parting slap of encouragement on Mr. Jerriss Redlon's arm, steps out of his private room, and by devious paths, is presently standing at the door of Miss Peale's dressing-room, awaiting a reply to his knock.

Gerton opens the door.

"It's Mr. Forman, madam; may he come in?"

"Certainly, and welcome." She extends her hand cordially, gracefully, as he bows low over it.

"See how good they are to me! just look at my flowers!" She glances at a side of the room which is literally crowded with beautiful tributes.

"Very nice. We'll have them all on in the ball-room scene in the third act—unless you prefer not?"

"Oh, I should like it."

"How are you feeling—shaky?"

"Not at all. Miss Winthrop has just left me; she has been with me all day, and came with me to the theatre."

"I didn't see her in the house as I looked in just now."

"Oh, she got in the carriage again, and is going to enter from the front."

"Ah! Well—" glancing at his watch, and back again, a trifle anxiously, at her face.

She smiles.

"How is it?" he inquires, with the least possible hesitation in his smooth tones.

"It is well."

"Sure?"

"Perfectly."

"The stage can wait five, ten minutes, even longer, if you say so."

"Not a moment; I am ready." The manager surveys her with his clear, perceptive, scrutinizing eyes. He recalls with perfect, calm accuracy just how much in money, judgment, and reputation he is risking; but the glance seems to reassure him.

"Then, Miss Peale," he says, in a quiet, business-like tone, "if you please, *Dolores* is called."

He accompanies her to the wings, gives her hand a short, hearty clasp, and in a few seconds is back in his own room, where the faint notes of the orchestra are just audible to Mr. Redlon and himself, as they sit there quietly for the next *mauvais quart d'heure* or so.

When Miss Winthrop, having assisted Miss Peale and Gerton with the toilette of *Dolores*, and having left her friend with as warm a kiss and as tender a "God bless you, dear!" as one womanly heart ever bestowed upon another, entered the Criterion Theatre that night, and, preceded by Mrs. Odlorne and followed by Moray Stuart, came into her box, it is safe to say that not an eye in the house was turned other than upon her lovely pale face, or that a single tongue was busied otherwise than with the news, which had reached society only that morning, of her engagement to the man who now took his place with a haughty possessive air at the back of her chair.

The comments were many and various; and yet, after all perhaps nothing differing from the usual remarks incident to all such announcements—not quite such an infusion of the "What can he see in her?" and "Whatever can she find in

him?" element, but enough and to spare of pretty wishes and hopes, and petty envyings and jealousies, and unlimited surmise and immeasurable interest.

Mrs. Roosevelt Rose, having marshalled the Drummond-Pecks up to town that day, in company with the entire Lenox colony, sat in the box opposite to Mrs. Odlorne's; and, truth to tell, Mrs. Rose and her contingent excited only a less degree of interest than that exhibited in favor of Miss Winthrop and her *fiancé*.

For, strictly *en evidence*, leaned the sweet little nobleman beside the chair freighted with his intended bride. Mrs. Rose might well straighten her head, crowned on this auspicious occasion with a blue velvet coronet trimmed with pearls; might well survey with pride the results of the past seven months' unremitting training, as exemplified in the well appearance of the charming family who surrounded her, and in that of the prospective member of it who now criticised, with an air of quasi-boredom, the toilettes of the ladies within range of his little vision.

Mr. Drummond-Peck sat, uneasily clutching his cane and his lorgnette, at Mrs. Rose's right.

Presently he lifted the glass to his eyes with both hands, and looked at Mrs. Odlorne's box.

Mrs. Rose's eyes followed in the same direction.

"And that, Mis' Rose, is the gentleman that's going to marry that young lady, eh?" Mr. Peck says, in his companion's ear.

"So they say." Mrs. Rose's fat, bare shoulders rise still farther above the blue velvet bodice which encases her redundant form.

"Umph!"

"Why?" Mrs. Rose says "Why?" more for the purpose of acknowledging Mr. Drummond-Peck's propinquity, than for any desire that she has to question the motive of his remark—if indeed it could possibly have any.

"Well, I swan! Hold on—now, I didn't mean that—I mean that ef anybody'd asked me, I should hev allowed that that Mr. Stuart was a married man already."

Mrs. Rose turns squarely around in her chair; her narrow

eyes seem to filter the ugly light that suddenly shines in them, through a mist of cunning, curious expectancy.

"My dear Mr. Peck, what do you mean?"

"Well—" William Peck says, retrenching his outlay of confidential exuberance with a calculating smile—"dunno as I mean anything."

"But, Mr. Peck!"—remonstratingly.

"Ain't sure thet I do," he responds, tapping his scant hair with his bony fingers.

"Confide in me, my dear Mr. Peck. You have admitted the knowledge of a—a something— I beg of you to rely upon me in this, as you have honored me by doing in other matters." Mrs. Rose pauses gracefully, thus giving this tentative close to her speech the time necessary to fully digest in the sluggish intellect of her patron.

Could Nina Winthrop, who at this very moment caught sight of the scheming and most worldly-wise countenance of Mrs. M. Roosevelt Rose—could Miss Winthrop but have known just how much or how little Mrs. Rose had overheard of the conversation between Moray Stuart and Louise Peale on the night of the Winhurst ball, she would have been spared an anxiety that was wearing upon her deeply—an anxiety that was only one of many bitter things that this week of her life held full for her.

Mrs. Rose had heard absolutely nothing—that is, no word; the two voices she had distinctly recognized; the photo in the disused room at Wastelands she had thereupon recalled; the old, intangible, not-to-be-traced hint of Miss Peale's elopement with some one, she had not failed to recollect: and, with the unerring instinct of her class, Mrs. Rose had pieced and patched these three things together with the clever aid of her own news-hungering wits.

It was an instinct with her to hunt out foibles, failings, forgotten things, hidden things: she was the incarnation of scent; and had she not been a human being, she would have been a bloodhound. Therefore she glowed and grew warm under the influence of Mr. Peck's remark.

"Come, now, my dear Mr. Peck; I'm waiting."

"Eh?" returns William Peck, blankly.

"I—am—waiting," with a playful tap of her large, expensive fan on the gentleman's meagre arm.

"How's that?" queries Mr. Peck.

"What made you say, my dear Mr. Peck, that you thought my dear friend Moray Stuart, the *fiancé* of Miss Winthrop, was—a married man?"

"Guess I didn't say that—now, did I?"

"Well, you said—"

"No, ma'am. I said that ef anybody'd asked me, I should hev allowed he was a married man."

"Why?" Mrs Rose persists, with rising vigor, as the orchestra has ceased to play, and a chance lost is, in her opinion, never quite regained.

"Now, pa!" exclaims Mrs. Drummond-Peck, opportunely claiming her spouse's attention for the first time that evening—"Now the curtain's goin' up; and Mr. Redlon himself told us she'd be right there, right away! Now—"

Mr. Redlon had told the truth. With a very commendable disregard for the traditions of polite society, as hitherto depicted for us by most modern and native playwrights, Jerriss had ignored the valet, the maid (always appropriately arrayed in a peasant costume, and not so eminently adapted to the requirements, therefore, of domestic service as might be desired by a possible mistress), and the feather-duster, and had lifted his curtain on a very pretty moonlight effect, interior, with his heroine standing, her back half-turned to the audience, looking out of a window.

The picture was a beautiful one. Louise, her exquisite face, more to be likened to a rare cameo than ever, in its novel framing of smooth jet-black hair, stood there, as unconsciously as a child, a rose in her hand, all her draperies white and flowing, and the slight, graceful silhouette thrown into perfect relief against the yellow silk curtain at her side.

Before she could utter a word, the welcome came—a faint murmur, a thrill to her heart; a louder echo, and then the full, splendid burst of applause and greeting that sent the blood rushing up through the rouge—a redder flood to her cheeks, and back again to her panting heart—that made Jerriss Redlon turn

pale and tremble where he sat, unmanned, with Dave Forman at his side trying to brace him in his cool, clever, easy fashion.

The first act passed off admirably, without a hitch or a break to mar it, either scenically or artistically; and Louise had just been called before the curtain for the second time, when Nina, leaning forward in her chair, applauding with all her little strength, heard a tap at the box-door.

"Come in," she said, turning to look over her shoulder with a bright smile on her mouth.

Van Cortland entered.

When she looked up swiftly into the misery of those haggard, hungering eyes, her own fell, the laughter died on her lips, and the red sank out of her face.

"Good-evening," he says simply, steadying himself with a hand on the high back of her chair, and including in his salute both Mrs. Odlorne and Mr. Stuart.

"Good-evening," she answers—and until she dies, whatever of bliss may be hers, it can never quite obliterate the memory of the agony of her soul that hour.

She was turning the knife in the heart of the man she loved; and what though she knew she could heal the wound—did it not stab there, now, all the same?

He takes a newspaper-cutting from his vest-pocket and holds it before her eyes.

"Is it true?" he asks, in a patient, dogged way.

She inclines her head.

Inclines her head, and takes from the table a great bunch of flowers and holds them up to her face. His eyes mechanically follow her movements as he replaces the slip in his pocket.

They are his own flowers.

He draws up a chair behind hers, and sits down on it.

"You have no objection, I suppose, to my stopping here just a few moments?"

"No," tremulously.

He looks at her with wild, wide, jealous eyes; he leans toward her, and then pulls himself back with a start.

"What do you think of the first act?" she asks finally.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The first act—did you like it?"



"I—I don't believe I've seen it."

"Did you just come in, then?"

"I think so—yes, I just came in, of course."

The music has ceased. Mrs. Odlorne settles herself afresh in a more comfortable pose, and Moray fixes his eyes with a view to reassuming the place at Miss Winthrop's chair which he has graciously and courteously permitted the other man to usurp during the *entr' acte*.

But Mr. Van Cortland does not move; on the contrary, he sits quite still there, with his handsome big hand grasping the bit of fancy wood-work at the top of the chair, and with his eyes bent upon the back of her pretty head.

And he sits there through the act, without a word—stunned, dazed, stupefied with the course his life has taken; he does not make even a pretence of looking at the stage; he does not hear a syllable that is said there, nor is he conscious that he is surrounded by his kind.

What does he think?

He does not think.

And the curtain goes down upon the second act of *The Brazilian*.

As it fell there was a slight, indeterminate pause; one accustomed to such phases would know instinctively that the play hung in the balance—that it lay with the remainder of it to make or mar the fortunes of its author. Jerriss Redlon, tempted for a few minutes from his den, felt it to the inmost recesses of his soul, and cursed himself for having involved her in his own wreck.

After this hesitation came the applause—generous, heartfelt, earnest, but almost wholly for the actress, and only sympathetically for the play or the playwright.

Mrs. Odlorne turned to Mr. Van Cortland as Louise disappeared after her call.

"She is lovely!" with enthusiasm.

"I beg pardon," rising, and coming forward to the seat Drusilla graciously indicates at her side.

Prince Charming does not wait one second; he promptly assumes the place Mr. Van Cortland has vacated, and enjoys, as

only such a man as he could enjoy, the perfect, and unstinted, and ample triumph of the hour.

She is his, and the world knows that she is—his world, her world, *the* world; and the man who sits there with a strange look on his drawn face, knows it too.

She, patrician to the tips of her little fingers, with centuries full of ancestors looking back assuredly to a twelfth-century splendid tomb in Westminster's chancel—she is to be his wife; and whence he sprang, and what he has done with the life he so worships, he best wots of. It is the pinnacle of a gratified ambition, the crowning point of a smooth and successful career.

Beside all which—above and beyond all which—he loves this woman as fiercely, madly, importunately, and desiringly as any man ever loved any woman on this earth.

Some men come in to greet Miss Winthrop and Mrs. Odlorne. Moray is forced to shift his stand.

Jack rises and shakes hands with the little widow.

"Good-evening," he says to Nina, as the music and the other voices make a hum about them, and Stuart is busy being congratulated by his friends.

She puts out her hand, and then and there he remembers, oh, so well! a girl's broken voice that early morning—when was it—years?—nay, only days ago—saying to him, "No matter what I do, have faith in me."

Well, he takes her hand, and shivers at the touch.

"Wh—when shall I see you again?" Miss Winthrop may well falter over a question her lips have never framed before for any man's hearing.

"See me again!" he murmurs. "Why—I don't know." He fetches a sigh in a confused way, as if trying to bring himself into form, and not being at all sure of the means to employ.

"I wish you to be at Winhurst on Monday of next week."

"At Winhurst—next Monday—you wish it? Very well," patiently.

"You will be there?"

"Oh yes."

He bows, and leaves her.

The guests also leave; and Prince Charming resumes his pose, sustaining the same with so admirable a grace for the rest of the

evening as to win for himself an envying plaudit from every unwedded woman in the house.

"Now, old fellow," Forman says to Jerriss, "I don't know what you're going to do for the next fifteen minutes; but I am going to stand in the house and watch the act. By Jupiter! I've staked my pile on this thing, and I'm getting a little curious to see how it's going."

"Going to the devil," groans Mr. Redlon, succinctly.

"Can't tell. Come in with me."

"I—no, sir."

"All right. Stay where you are, then."

The beginning of the act was quiet enough; but as it progressed—as the interest which had threatened at one luckless moment during the second to flag, even to fail, was born again, and with its force and passion fairly swept like a whirlwind through the little theatre; as men leaned forward breathless in their chairs; as women sat with parted lips, gazing intently at the scene; as the actress whom they had suspected, and the woman whom they had known, stood revealed to them an artist of the first rank, notwithstanding her crudities and mannerisms, giving them her impersonation of a suffering, sinning, loving woman with a splendor, variety, pathos, and impassionment hitherto undreamed of; as the working of the plot unfolded, straightforwardly, and yet full of the subtle suggestiveness and reserved power without which no play is tolerable—as all this transpired before Dave Forman's eyes, he folded his arms and stood still for a few moments, and then, before the curtain was down, before the wild burst of tumultuous applause re-echoed through the house, he went back into his private room, and touched Redlon lightly on the shoulder.

"What's the matter?"

"Come on."

"Where?"

"Round back."

"Anything happened?"

"Yes."

"What?" agitatedly, for his thoughts fly first of all to her.

"Oh, nothing serious. Your play's a hit, that's all; and in five minutes more you'll be wanted to show yourself before the

curtain. Come on, I say, old boy; it's a go!" And he presses his friend's hand with eager, sympathetic warmth.

It was a go.

In just about five minutes more, Jerriss Redlon and Louise Peale stood together behind the footlights of the Criterion, to receive that applause which is nothing if not an intoxication, to an author or an actor—the delicious sound of the clapping of many human hands.

When they had disappeared from view, in the shadow of the friendly wings, where Gerton lay in wait with her mistress's wrappings, Jerriss caught her hand in his.

"Oh!" cries the poor fellow, lamely, "I owe it all to you—all—"

"I owe it all to you," whispers she.

"Louise, Louise—let me love you!"

And then—even then—with the splendid exultation of her triumph full upon her, she only allows herself this:

"I love you," she whispers brokenly, "too well to ever listen to you again."

"But—"

"No; let me go. Gerton!"

And presently, from a very far back seat, he is awaiting the music's finish, and swearing to himself that he will win her yet, revelling in the sweet acknowledgment that her love is his.

Why! is not his cup full—full? and only ten minutes ago it had seemed so empty!

The fourth act was in progress. Both Mrs. Rose and Mr. Drummond-Peck were eyeing the scene with only a half-way interest. *Dolores* was yet to come—stay! there, now she is on; that sweet, pallid face shrouded almost to the eyes in a black lace mantilla.

"I swan!" Mr. Drummond-Peck, prospective father-in-law to the nobility of Europe, falls back quite a length in his fauteuil.

Mrs. Rose turns sharply to look at him.

"What is it?" she asks, staring first at the thin, rough face of the Texan, and then at the lovely vision on the stage.

"It's her—now—that's what it is."

"Who?" Mrs. Rose feels something of kinship tainting the air, and her breath is bated as she glances eagerly back and forth,

"Well—now—Mis' Rose—guess you're about the right party to tell this here thing to—ef any one is."

"Of course I am, my dear Mr. Peck; of course I am."

Mrs. M. Roosevelt Rose at this moment—so vivid is her imagination—beholds floating in the air before her excited vision the "double-header" that shall astound a news-thirsting public with its "Tragi-comedy, or Reality stranger than Romance, in High Life!" and—the three-figured check which shall be its delightful equivalent.

"Mebbe I'm wrong, but I guess I ain't; my mem'ry's pretty fair, and I was always good at reck'lectin' folks' faces ef I hed half a chance."

"Yes; I don't doubt it, my dear Mr. Peck. Yes?" Mrs. Rose sidles closer to the billionaire's chair as she thus encouragingly responds.

"Well, now—this here's confidence, strict confidence—and mind, you ain't a-goin' to—" William Peck winks playfully at Mrs. M. Roosevelt Rose, as he pauses.

"To what, my dear Mr. Peck? to what?"

"To trade it away, you know, or anything of that sort."

"Mr. Peck!" Here Virtue sat enthroned, and wailed at Mr. Drummond-Peck's degeneracy.

"Well—now look here: ef you feel as if you'd like to sell it out, you jist come to me, and I'll buy it back again from you. Because I'm goin' to tell you this thing—I want your advice. You're up to these kind o' things, and p'raps I ain't."

"Very well." Mrs. Rose puts Virtue back on her shelf, and takes down Prudence as a more valuable helpmeet in the present crisis.

She listens to Mr. Drummond-Peck's brief whispered recital—and it would be difficult to say if William Peck had or had not learned anything of worldly ways during his seven years' mingling with polite society; but his cheerful offer to buy back his own wares would certainly argue, either a great degree of sagacity or—perhaps merely a lofty disregard for lucre.

When the pretty curtain fell for the last time that night at the Criterion, the success of *The Brazilian* was an assured fact; and the success of Louise Peale equally one,

Bennie Somers rushed into Mrs. Odlorne's box, and taking Nina by both hands, exclaimed,

"I knew it! No woman could do *Juliet* as she did it at your house there, a few weeks ago, and not hit the mark in a rôle like this one. Redlon is a lucky fellow; it's a good play, a capital play! Forman's a fortunate man. I've just been telling them both so behind the scenes. And now I haven't another moment; my copy must be finished and on its way to the office in just ten minutes more. You will see, there will not be a single dissenting voice from my verdict to-morrow—and if there is, all I can say is, a little healthy variety in a dramatical-critical way never does a bit of harm."

CHAPTER SEVENTEENTH.

It may be premised that Prince Charming was a radiantly happy man when, on Tuesday evening, he found himself back in Lenox and at Curtis's,—whither he had removed immediately after going through the formality of asking from Mrs. Odlorne the hand of her niece in marriage,—and enjoying the evident interest, the furtive curiosity, and the open gratulations of the set gathered within the walls of the hospitable, ugly, old brick hostelry.

There were two subjects under discussion during that hour before tea—Miss Winthrop's engagement and Miss Peale's *début*; most of the people had been to town to attend the one, and had thus unwittingly "assisted," as our Gallic friends have it, at the first view of the new *fiancés* as well.

Moray bore his honors well, just the faintest accession of hauteur tinging his ever-admirable and ever-ready suavity; the artistic head poised just a trifle more uprightly, the handsome chin a bit more in the air, the fire in his cool eyes more keen, and the smile on his pale lips more frequent—this was all; and all was in thorough, graceful keeping with the situation.

"Ah, you naughty, naughty fellow," murmured Mrs. Rose, "to have led us all so far afield! Here we were, imagining in our

hearts that you were going to bear off the heroine of the hour—”

“And am I not?” returns he, gravely.

“For you, yes, without doubt; but I mean, we all thought that Miss Winthrop was favoring Mr. Van Cortland, and that you”—Mrs. Roosevelt Rose’s narrow visual organs rest upon the face of Prince Charming with a pertinacity of interest that must have been most touching to that gentleman—“that you were going to rob the stage of its newly-acquired treasure, and convert Miss Peale into—Mrs. Moray Stuart.”

“Is it possible!” smiles he. “Ah, my dear Mrs. Rose, that should only teach even a remarkably clever woman like you that appearances are horribly deceiving sometimes. Tell me, when does Miss Ida’s marriage take place?”

“In December—and yours? Very soon, of course?”

“Ah, most assuredly, if I have any influence. And now, you will excuse me, I know. I am due at Winhurst for dinner.”

“Very pleasant gentleman, Monsieur Stuart,” ripples the little Count, as Moray disappears.

“Elegant!” responds his betrothed.

“He marries too, eh?”

“Oh yes.”

“Very nice—to marry.”

“Oh!” cries the *fiancée*, with a smile, and a healthy blush suffusing her round cheeks.

“Is it not so, Madame Rose?”

“What, my dear Count?”

“Very nice to marry.”

“Quite the proper thing.”

“I suppose so,” Miss Drummond-Peck allows, surveying her little possession with some pride—although, to do her mere justice, it is but fair to state that Ida did not at all grasp the entirety of the small nobleman’s *personnel*, or character, or mind, or disposition, or anything appertaining to him at all, save and except that tiny and legitimate bauble which was embroidered on his handkerchief corners, and stuck inside his hats; any more than the high-born M. de Vervens took in anything in connection with Miss Ida, with the single exception of her *dot*.

To tell the truth, the little gentleman was immeasurably

weary. That very evening, finding himself *en tête-à-tête* with his social sponsor and broker, he gave utterance to a plaint.

"*Mais, madame,*" cried the little man, as his shoulders flew up to greet his pretty ears, "*que voulez-vous !* I am *jeune homme*. Here I stay in the country !" The little Count's inflection is simply inimitable and also indescribable ; within its treble compass is included a panorama of that *tout Paris* which he assuredly finds no equivalent for in Lenox, or—in Miss Drummond-Peck's society.

"Patience !" counsels the lady, finger on lip.

"*Patience !*" groans he, echoing. "*Mais j'ai une idée ! Tiens ! eh, madame,* I go to Paris a leetle treep, to get for Mademoiselle a *corbeille* ? *Tiens ! quelle belle idée !*"

"Charming," assents Mrs. Rose, a dull but amused glint betraying itself in her eyes.

"I go next week, eh ? I stay two months—come back ; *les noces* immediately—so, the time is passed, eh ?"

"Delightful !"

"I think so," meditatively. "I go," decisively.

"But, Count, you go," imitating the tone of her companion.

"Who pays ?"

"*Diable !*" murmurs the last of the de Vervens ; "*c'est vrai.*"

"You still go ?" queries Mrs. Rose.

"Ah, *mon Dieu !* I stay." The Count rises, thrusts his little hands into his pockets, and strides up and down the hall. "I stay, yes ; *mais quand je serai—eh bien, c'est assez !*"

And some malicious persons of, perchance, a too foreboding or imaginative turn of mind might have been disposed to argue from Alphonse's tone and manner that the path of the future Countess de Vervens would not be altogether strewn with roses—but then, Mrs. Rose could and would have freed them from any such idea with one sentence from her pliant, agreeable store.

When Mr. Stuart reached Winhurst, he found Mrs. Odlorne in sole possession of the library, and was greeted with the pleasing intelligence that Miss Winthrop was suffering from too severe a headache to be visible that evening.

Moray, to all outward appearances, resigned himself with a tolerable grace to this strictly dissolving view of the paradise

he had dreamed and planned this evening should be to him; although an observer might have remarked, as he took a turn or two up and down the long room, a species of cousin-german to the expression on the countenance of the noble de Vervens as he had uttered his "*Mais quand je serai*"—an expression that bespoke future and unlimited reparation for ills now, perhaps, smilingly endured.

He dined with Drusilla.

The six courses of this duologue dinner choked him in succession.

He talked with Drusilla: and nearly every word he uttered was wrenched from his lips.

He listened to Drusilla: and very frequently he had not the remotest idea what the vivacious little woman said.

Before his mental vision was one picture only—that of the face of the woman he loved. In his ears sounded one thing merely—the soft notes of her voice. And as to hunger—he was gaunt, pallid, famished, for the sight, the touch, the word that he certainly was quite justified in thinking he was entitled to.

But he sat there quietly enough, and inclined his head, and played with his knife and fork, and echoed the little widow's complaints, and answered her questions—which Nina had blithely refused to do—*à propos* of the marriage and all the thousand et cæteras which women love.

And then they rose and went back to the drawing-room, where, asking permission, he scribbled off a few hasty lines and sent them up to his betrothed.

Anne returned with the word that she feared to disturb Miss Winthrop, as she seemed to be asleep.

And finally—all evenings do come to an end—it struck ten, and he left.

He said he should be up in the morning by twelve; and Drusilla replied, "Yes, for luncheon; but don't come earlier, unless you only wish to see me, for Nina is never able to rise before noon, after one of her headaches."

The next day, however, by nine, a note came from Mr. Stuart, and inquiries which were verbally answered by Mrs. Odlorne.

An hour and a half, or more, later—for it was a perfect day of

renewed warmth and Indian-summer-like softness—groups of people sat on the piazzas of Curtis's; the street was full, and in fact the little dingy town presented one of its gayest and most alive aspects.

Mrs. Rose and the ladies of the Drummond-Peck family sat near the corner, de Vervens in attendance, and William Peck not far away, carefully getting through with yesterday's evening paper.

Moray Stuart stood leaning against a column.

Perhaps in all his existence he had never looked more handsome. There was, at the worst of times, a certain spirituality of effect about his physique, a positive halo of cleanliness and uprightness, that made him both marked and remarkable; and at no hour of his life had this pervasion been so characteristically present with him as at this.

He looked handsome.

And he also looked wholesome, blithe, alert; a breathing, fleshly exposition of the triumphant domination of spirit over flesh—which reads like a paradox, but so long as man is mortal as well as immortal, is not to be accounted as one.

He stood, too, in the sunshine fully; it glorified him and gave to his air and face the warmth both lacked, bestowing heat as well as a kind of intangibility, which admirably became both his mood and his attitude.

Both were expectant, and yet satisfied.

He had received word that Miss Winthrop was better; the quality of the air invigorated him to a full realization of the exquisite perfection of his position. He was, in short, in that physical and mental state when the breath comes with joyfulness, when the world is heaven, and when a man of his calibre worships the mere life that pulses through his veins and which gives him the power to enjoy existence.

Had he been an individual given to any sort of recognition, or praise, or thanksgiving, or acknowledgment, toward any power outside of himself, he would have uttered a "Thank God!"

Instead, he drew in a full, deep breath, smiled, turned his head, and saw Miss Winthrop riding Flake slowly down the

street, coming toward the hotel, the four dogs after her, and Poole following.

He quitted the piazza, and stood, hat in hand, on the sidewalk, as she advanced.

Within two feet of him she raised her eyes; they met his; and then she touched her horse on the shoulder lightly—passed the man who stood there without the shadow of a recognition, and cantered down the road.

He tottered; then righted himself; put on his hat, and, livid—life itself almost quenched out of his aspect—staggered up the village, over the hill, slowly, then faster, to Winhurst.

Of all those forming the groups assembled on the hotel porch or piazzas, Mrs. Roosevelt Rose was the first to recover the use of limb and tongue.

With an alacrity only equalled by the sinuosity of the movement—it is astounding how sinuous a stout, heavy woman can be in her motions when the soul that informs her is tortuous and deviating—Mrs. Rose left her rocking-chair, still grasping in one plump white hand the sheets of an unfinished letter to her newspaper, and crossed over to the more retired spot where William Peck sat swinging his gold eye-glasses by their chain, and blankly staring at Mr. Moray Stuart's gradually lessening shadow.

"Well, Mr. Peck," murmurs the relict of the lamented M. Roosevelt Rose.

"Well, ma'am," responds Mr. Peck, without rising; in point of fact, Mr. Peck had not that fine sense of the fitness of things which should have urged him to rise.

He sat still.

"Dear Mr. Peck," Mrs. Rose flowed on, laying her disengaged hand on the back of a convenient chair, and looking down interestedly at her thoroughly well-polished nails.

"Yes, ma'am," returns Mr. Peck, in a by no means receptive way.

"I am ready to sell out now, Mr. Peck," the lady says distinctly.

"Air you? Well—what's the figger?"

"But I'd rather not sell out; I don't want to, really I don't. I should so much prefer—in view of the present interesting

crisis"—Mrs. Rose glances in the direction lately taken by Prince Charming—"so very much rather give the affair to the world."

"How much do you get apiece for them letters of yours?" Mr. Peck asks, ignoring an æsthetic view of the case in hand.

"Oh! it is not the value of the letter in money; it is the éclat of being *the one* to have known it, and to be able to give all the particulars." Mrs. Rose's countenance appears as if lubricated with the very essential oil of scandal-mongering.

"Um!" murmurs Mr. Peck. "Well, ma'am, you see, a promise is a promise, and an agreement's an agreement. Now, you jist name your price. I'm ready to buy back; 't's no more'n fair to pay you for your advice: that's what I wanted, that's what I got. 'Tain't your fault ef I didn't feel like makin' use of it."

"But," she presses, "it would be such a delicious bit in this letter," looking down at the fluttering sheets; "and although Miss Peale never did appreciate my interest in her, or value the assistance I might have been to her, still everything helps an actress, and nothing, perhaps, so much as an affair of this kind. To be talked about is half the battle with people of that class, you know, and, indeed, I would like to do her a good turn."

"Would you?" Mr. Peck says. "Well, then, you take my advice and sell out. I don't mind what you ask for it," he remarks cheerfully, setting the large diamond pin squarely in his scarf.

"You insist, then?" the woman says, with as much irritation as she ever permitted herself to manifest.

"You've hit it," the gentleman responds, with a lively air.

"Very well; I leave it to you, then." She taps her foot impatiently on the floor.

"O K," Mr. Drummond-Peck ejaculates succinctly. "How's a hundred dollars sound—too little?"

Mrs. Rose again inspects those pink, shining nails of hers.

"S'pose we call it two-fifty, eh?"

"Very well."

"Satisfactory?"

"Yes."

"All right; I'll include it in the next check, or make out one this afternoon, 'chever you like."

"Include it, please." And then Mrs. Rose slowly returns to the task of finishing her correspondence.

When Prince Charming arrived at the door of Winhurst, Miss Winthrop, having returned from her ride, had already dismounted and had gotten half-way up the staircase.

"Is Miss Winthrop at home?" he asks, in a curious, restrained voice.

"Miss Winthrop has just come in, sir."

"Ah! Will you say to her, if you please,"—the Prince was always affable with his inferiors; in fact, he was always affable with everyone,—"that Mr. Stuart must see her for a few moments?"

Mrs. Odlorne, who has overheard the oddly-worded message, repeats it to her niece, with an air of ill-concealed wonderment, as she overtakes her in the upper corridor.

"Mr. Stuart not only 'must,' but shall see me," Nina says, retracing her steps, and motioning aside the servant whom she meets.

Before he is aware of it, she has entered the library by the upper door, and stands still, making the slightest inclination of her haughty head.

"Nina!" cries the man, desperately, darting toward her with outstretched hands.

"Well, Mr. Stuart?" stepping back.

"Nina!" cries he, wildly. "For God's sake! what is the matter? Why have you treated me so? What is it? What have I done?"

"What have you done?" she repeats slowly, leaning her shoulder against the mantel end, and looking down at the crop which she still holds in her hand. "Do you wish me to tell you?"

"Why not? Above all things, yes." His light eyes open to their fullest, clearest extent; they are limpid, innocent, pure-looking eyes, although the handsome face which they adorn is drawn and lined.

"Very well," she says slowly. "You were married to Louise Rogers over fourteen years ago; you are her husband in the sight of God—and in mine."

Prince Charming laughs—one of those preposterously hearty, almost contagious laughs of his, which have heretofore caused him to be deemed such a very good fellow.

"Nina, my child,"—tenderly,—*"it is not possible that you credit any absurd story that this Miss Peale, as she calls herself, has told you. It is rather an ungraceful, almost an unmanly, thing for a man to do, to reveal a woman's true character; but to you, in your innocence, I must now say, in self-defence, that our fair friend the actress is nothing more nor less than what so many women of that class are—an adventuress. What my relations with her may have been years ago—my child, my child"*—turning from her and pacing up the room—*"I am but a man."*

"Have you anything more to say, Mr. Stuart?" she inquires, after a pause; her cheeks are scarlet, and her lips tremble.

He squarely faces her in inquiry.

"No? I thought not. Miss Peale has never mentioned your name to me, save in a perfectly conventional way." He starts. *"My friend,"* with emphasis, *"is not an adventuress; and—you were married to her in a little Texas town fourteen years ago!"*

"That infernal Peck has been talking to you!" he gasps, grinding his teeth together with fury. *"It was a mock-marriage. Good God! such things are common enough in the lives of men—and of such women. Oh, Nina, my darling, here at your feet let me kneel"*—Mr. Moray Stuart here suits the action to the word—*"and pour out my confession. I have been no better and no worse than other men; I"*—there are not only tears in Prince Charming's mellow voice, but there are salt drops sparkling on his long, beautiful lashes—*"I—oh, my priestess, my love, do you shrive me and forgive me! Cannot your love do so much, even, as this?"*

"My love!" Her red lip curls. *"Rise,"* she says contemptuously. *"Your confession is a trifle out of date and place. Mr. Peck has never uttered your name in my presence; but, Moray Stuart,"*—Nina Winthrop's words have come slowly, up to this moment; now they rush from her lips in a vehement torrent,—*"the night of the ball, during the entire time of your conversation with Louise Peale, I was in the upper summer-house; I*

overheard every syllable you uttered. The day I was at Wastelands I found her photograph in one of the rooms."

He writhes in torture, and then he interrupts her with the pounce of a hyena.

"So Miss Winthrop engaged herself to the man whom she believed to be her friend's husband? A very honorable course, truly, for a woman of Miss Winthrop's station and breeding!"

She smiles.

"Yes," she answers; "Miss Winthrop did precisely as you have described. Do you suppose, Moray Stuart," crossing near to him where he stands by the piano, "that a man like you can go on to the end without retribution overtaking him at some point? When I learned your dastardly perfidy, your unmentionable cowardice and contemptible rascality, from your own lips, I made up my mind, then and there, that as you had made her suffer, so should you be made to suffer yourself. There is not a pang that you have inflicted on that woman's heart, there is not a stab you have struck at her tortured soul, there is not a blow in the dark that you have dealt her—that you have not received at my hands its full equivalent, in the broad flare of daylight, in the eyes of the world whose opinion you worship, and from the woman whom you love! Ah, yes, do not mistake me; we are face to face at last, and for the first time. I know the exact value of my power and the weight of my retaliation."

"Nina, Nina!" He falls upon his knees and crawls toward her.

"Rise, sir," she says, looking down upon him as one would upon a reptile.

"The woman is not my wife," he cries.

"I do not believe you," she replies slowly; "but, if she is not, she should be."

"She should not!" he exclaims hotly.

"Not another syllable of insinuation. You are not even to be scorned—only to be spurned."

"Nina!"—the man is off his head, and like many another infatuated player, finding himself at last in earnest, hurries on to his own destruction—"had you never one spark of love for me?"

Perhaps it was insanity; perhaps it was merely sublimity.

Prince Charming had always been a success in other people's estimation and his own—a perfect success; and no human attribute dies so hard a death as self-esteem.

Nina looks at him for fully a minute, which is some portion of time in a crisis like the present.

"Mr. Stuart," she says finally, indicating the direction with the handle of her crop, "there is the door."

And Prince Charming, with a curse proceeding almost, not quite, from his thin, handsome lips, made his exit.

He ran deviously, knocking against trees and bushes, across the fields, until he reached his own place. When he had gotten to the doorstep, he stumbled and fell upon the broad stone. He sat there an instant, when his eyes caught sight of something glittering in the muddy path. He reached over and picked it up: it was a handsome topaz bracelet, one that he remembered to have seen on Louise Peale's arm on the night of the Winhurst ball. He cleaned it off with his handkerchief, and put it in his pocket.

He kicked the wet, pebbly soil in front of him with his pointed shoe, making a little puddle. As he sat there he looked an old man—one who indeed could not even look back to youth, save in bitterness and with an oath. Suddenly he got up, went into his house, entered the room opposite the drawing-room, and presently, with an avaricious, curious smile parting his quivering, pale lips, Prince Charming, having unlocked the secretary in the pier, occupied himself in making a bonfire on the dusty hearth, of all the papers and letters that he found in the little drawers and pigeon-holes. The last scrap that he threw upon the pile, and watched crumble into an ash, was a yellowed bit subscribed with his own name, that of Louise Rogers, and one other.

Later in the day Mr. Moray Stuart's luggage was sent for to Curtis's, the messenger remarking that Mr. Stuart had received important telegrams demanding his immediate presence in Washington.

CHAPTER EIGHTEENTH.

NINA, having dismissed her late *fiancé*, stood for a few moments shivering; her two hands, cold as ice, were clasped together, and every drop of blood seemed to have quitted her face, and to be bubbling and throbbing about her heart. She was not, however, motionless for very many minutes; she crossed the room to her desk, and, still standing, wrote a note, a very brief one, and addressed the same to "W. Drummond-Peck, Esq., Curtis's." Summoning Poole, Miss Winthrop bade him ride with it as fast as he could, and deliver it in person.

Then she went up to her room, and got out of her habit and into a pretty morning-gown.

Mrs. Odlorne hesitatingly tapped at her niece's door.

"Come in, auntie," Nina said, combing out the little fringe of curls on her white, low brow.

Drusilla entered, and stood gazing out of the window.

"Has Moray gone over to Wastelands?" she queries. "I think that is he crossing the meadows now."

"I do not know," Miss Winthrop replies distinctly.

"Will he return for luncheon with us, dear?" Mrs. Odlorne is outwardly calm, inwardly expiring with curiosity, born of that subtle something which she feels rather than knows to be permeating the domestic atmosphere of Winhurst.

"I think not, Aunt Druse."

"Aren't you positive, dear? because the Prince is so fond of baked apples; and if he will be back, I want to order some for him."

"You need not order them, auntie." Nina does not repress a smile as she answers.

"Nina! what is the matter?" Mistress Drusilla can no longer restrain herself.

"Nothing special; I have broken my engagement to marry Mr. Moray Stuart—that is all."

"Nina Winthrop! whatever—what in the name of common-sense possesses you? The very man of all others so suited to

you ; so spiritually-minded, so pure, so intense, so full of refinement ! Ah, my dear, mark my words ; you are making a great mistake—a terrible mistake ; there is not Moray Stuart's equal in the world."

"I hardly believe there is," Mrs. Odlorne's niece assents, in the pause which that estimable lady perforce makes while recruiting her lungs.

"Then—what on earth—at least—why—I mean, of course, my dear—of course, I have no wish—no wish whatever to inquire into your private affairs—but my affection for, and interest in, you urge me to beg you not to be too hasty. A man like Prince Charming is not met with every day."

"No, indeed," Miss Winthrop readily allows ; "that is quite true."

"Then, my dear, pause, reflect, consider. Are you not throwing away every chance of your future happiness, every possibility that life may have in store for you ? With such a man, Nina, to lean upon, what beside could you desire ? Ah, my dear, I know whereof I speak." The little widow here stops to silently apostrophize the departed Peter. "A strong arm, my dear, is what every woman needs ; she should estimate well the loss, ere she casts forever from her such a sweet support."

"Aunt Druse," Nina says, turning round squarely from the toilette table, "Moray Stuart is another woman's husband ; I never have had the faintest intention of marrying him at any time. Now he knows it. That is the only alteration that there is, so far as my mind, my heart, or my intentions are concerned."

"Wh—what !" Mrs. Drusilla utters a prolonged shriek, which brings not only Anne to the spot, but several of the other servants.

Salts, cologne, ice-water, camphor, and hartshorn are applied in rapid succession ; but Mrs. Odlorne proceeds from one swoon to another, even to the exclusion of a regard for powder—of any hue !

She seems to have fallen into a doze, when Mr. Peck is announced, and Nina leaves her in Anne's charge, half smiling at the irony of temperament which casts Mrs. Odlorne on her couch at the revelation of the dear Prince's true character, and sends her niece down into the drawing-room to interview a man

who may, she surmises, possibly give her some clue to the reality or falsity of Louise Peale's marriage.

"Good-morning, Mr. Peck," she says, putting out her hand, over which the cattle-king makes his awkward salaam. "I dare say, Mr. Peck, you find it very odd that I should have taken the liberty of asking you to come to me this morning; but I ventured, because I wanted to see you about—about a very grave matter—one involving the—the welfare of—of a person very dear to me—a lady."

"Yes, ma'am," William Peck replies, laying his ponderously gold-headed cane carefully across his knees. "I'm allers glad to do anyone a service."

"Thank you"—she hesitates painfully.

"Don't feel shy, no need to; jist go right ahead, 's if I wasn't here."

"Mr. Peck," the girl says, her color rising and scorching her cheeks as she speaks, "you know—at least you have met Mr. Moray Stuart?"

"I hev, ma'am." Mr. Drummond-Peck's rugged countenance is as impassive as that of one of the mild-eyed animals who have assisted him in the accumulation of what he terms his "pile."

"Will you pardon my asking you if you—ever met, knew Mr. Stuart before—before this summer? From a remark which escaped him this morning I judged that you had."

"I hev," Mr. Peck answers distinctly.

"Then you do know something of Mr. Stuart?" timidly.

"Jest two dollars' worth," Mr. Peck remarks, with a grim smile.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Jest two dollars' worth's what I said; that's th' amount paid for a marriage fee and license in the State of Texas!"

"Thank God!" It escapes her lips with so heartfelt a fervor as to cause the old man seated opposite her a genuine start of surprise.

"Hello!" exclaims Mr. Drummond-Peck. "I thought 'twas jest th' other way, and, like as not, you'd be feelin' rather down-hearted-like, and so on."

"Oh, no, no, no!" she cries; "you don't understand; I can't quite explain—oh, you'll forgive me, please."

"Certin, certin," he says soothingly. "P'raps I might give you some further information?"

"Could you tell me—do you remember the name—of the lady to whom—"

"I can't jest give you the name of the other party," he says reflectively, "but it's the lady who's called Miss Louise Peale nowadays."

Nina sighs a deep sigh of relief.

"I'll jest tell you all I know. The day I met this chap—'twas at his own house, Wastelands I believe he calls it—I's sure I reco'nized him, and I told him so; but he hadn't no use ev'dently for his mem'ry right there, and so I said no more about it, takin' for granted 's the other party was dead, mebbe—I never reco'nized her at all, nohow, until night 'fore last." Nina looks up at him with wide, eager eyes. "I tell you, ma'am, when she come out on that stage with them black lace fixin's all wound round her head, and no hair to be seen, I gave a start, and says I, 'William Peck, that's the face of the girl that stood up before you long ago'—same 'identical person! She was done up in black veils 'thout a streak of hair to be seen, and she never raised her eyes for one single instant: she'd no way of reco'nizin' me, nohow; she never see'd me—sez I, 'That's the girl you married to that chap down in Oliver, suthin' like fifteen years ago!'"

"You married them?" Nina exclaims.

"Yes, me. I was county jedge of Dallas County—Oliver's the county-town—and they come to me one stormy day, and I made 'em one then and there. My office-boy and the town-clerk's the witnesses; they most allers was."

"You're sure? there 'could be no mistake—it was—quite legal?" she falters.

"Lor' bless you! 'S legal's if the hull Supreme Court of the United States 'd been present. I'd take my oath to that part of the business any time!"

"Would you write it out for me?"

"I guess so."

"And—Mr. Peck—could my friend obtain a divorce from her husband without—publicity?"

"Easy 'nough. It lies about this way's far as I can get the hang of it, don't it?—he ain't supported her, nor rec'onized her nor had nothin' to do with her—for—"

"Fourteen years. He left her after they had been married but six months; she never saw or heard of or from him from that hour until—this autumn."

"Wall! Men is rascals, now ain't they? Divorce? Ruther! She won't hev no trouble, nor no publicity's necessary neither. I'll see her through it!"

"Will you? would you?"

"There's my hand on it."

"Oh, Mr. Peck!" And Nina Winthrop's soft, white, small hand lies gratefully within the grasp of William Peck.

There are tears—the first through all her trials—on her lashes. To these Mr. Peck merely pays the attention of turning his back, and walking over to the open secretary.

"Ef you'll allow me, I'll jest set down here and write out my little statement of that marriage, and put my name to it. Now's as good as any time, and mebbe it would be a kind of a comfort to Miss—well—the actress."

"You are very good—you are more than good. Oh, Mr Peck, you have brought happiness, peace, to two lives! You should feel very happy yourself."

"Two?" he ejaculates, taking off his glasses and regarding her attentively.

"Yes, two: Miss Peale and the true, honest man who loves her."

"Um! I see. Thought 'twan't you!"

"I! Oh, I am—" Nina looks down, and her lips tremble as they part in a strange, sweet little smile.

"You're all right, I guess—hope so anyhow," he adds, with kindness.

"Thank you."

"Thar! that's the ticket, I reckon, as 'll make the young lady feel quite comfortable-like. And now I guess I'll be goin'; ma and the girls 'll be a-wonderin' what's become of me." William Peck lays in Miss Winthrop's hand a sheet of paper well scrawled over in his illiterate hand, and firmly subscribed with his signature. "Now, when you want me, you jest let me know; I'll be on hand. And tell her she ain't got nothin' to fear, nohow; will you?"

"Indeed I will!" She presses his rough hand between both of hers, and essays no more.

When Mr. Peck has gone, Nina sits down at her desk—apparently this is to be a day of note-writing—and hastily pens a few lines to Louise. They run as follows:

"WINHURST, Wed.

"MY LOUISE: I have to-day broken my engagement to marry Moray Stuart. He is your husband; I enclose you the legal testimony to this fact from the hand of the man who performed your marriage ceremony—Mr. William Peck. He assures me that there will be neither difficulty nor publicity in the way of your obtaining what is righteously your due—a divorce from the man who has so wronged and embittered your life; and then, my darling girl, I know that happiness is in store for you, and that as the wife of the man who loves you, and whom you love, you will be a happier woman than you ever could have been before. Until Sunday, when we expect Jerriss as well as yourself,

Yours,

NINA.

"P. S.—I have worked in the dark, you may think; but when I show it you in the light, you will not blame me. N. W."

Nina had not only worked in the dark, as she told Miss Peale, but she had worked from impulse, and without regret. For even the small deceptions she had compelled herself to practise in the fulfilment of her impetuous and what might possibly be termed, by the light of our nineteenth-century utilitarian and realistic lanterns, quixotic scheme of *lex talionis*, she did not blame herself. The taking of the photo from its frame in the long-disused room at Wastelands; the explanation of its wherefore to the vigilant Mrs. Rose; the half-falsity, half-truth of the account given to Louise of the events of the ball-night; the brief engagement to marry Moray Stuart—for all this Nina Winthrop—a law unto herself, a veritable daughter of to-day, in some respects at least—had no supplementary repining.

And—for the great grief she had occasioned the man whom she loved?

Did she not, she said to herself, hold within the clasp of her two young arms a reparation all-sufficient even for sufferings such as his?

She did not know precisely how she ever lived through those last four days, the Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday before the Monday, when he had acceded to her wish and promised to be at Winhurst; but they were lived through—a species of tribute-money to the womanly shyness that would not have permitted Nina Winthrop to summon Jack Van Cortland sooner to her side, after the ordeal through which she had passed as even the supposititious *fiancée* of another man.

Friday she had received a telegram from Miss Peale—a few words only: “God bless you, dear. J. and I will be with you on Sunday.—L. R. P.”

And on Sunday they were speeding, as fast as steam could bring them, to Lenox.

Jerriss Redlon sat looking rather solemnly out of the window; Miss Peale had an open letter in her hand—it was Nina’s last—and her eyes were bent upon the page. As she rustled the sheet in turning it, he glanced at her face—it was radiant as, it seemed to him, he had never seen it before.

“That letter must contain some very good news,” he says, bending nearer to her chair.

“Why?”

“Because, as long as I have known you, I have never seen the face I love look so peacefully content. Is there not good news in it?” he asks.

“Yes, I think so.”

“Louise—”

“Hush—h!” she exclaims, her eyes turning on their fellow-passengers.

“No one is paying the slightest attention to us; no one can possibly hear my voice but you—Louise—” There is a queer pathos in his awkward face—a pathos rather to excite tears than a smile, for all its incongruity.

“Well?” she says, still holding Nina’s note in her lap.

“Am I a fool, or is there the ghost of a chance that some day you will share my life with me?”

“I want you to share something with me,” she says, speaking very low. “Will you care to?”

“Indeed will I—good or ill!”

“It is my ‘good news.’” She hands him the letter.

"Am I to read this?"

"If you will."

And as his eyes travel over the two pages of Miss Winthrop's big chirography, the blood rises higher and higher, warmer and warmer, in the pure, pale, shamed face of the woman who watches him with such yearning, waiting, hoping, eager eyes.

Jerriss Redlon folds it up carefully; he puts it in his vest-pocket, draws in his breath hard, and then trusts himself to look at her.

Their eyes meet—mingle—melt in that strange, indescribable glance of comprehension, realization, and promise which poets and prosaics have alike, and always, hitherto failed in reducing to the verbal definition of any language.

"You will be my wife?" he asks, quietly enough, as he leans over, apparently to rearrange some buckle of the shawl-strap on the hassock between them.

"Yes," she answers simply.

"You love me—Louise—my Louise?" glancing into her face.

"I love you."

It may be mentioned in this connection that Prince Charming spent last winter partly in Washington, partly in Paris; that he awaits in the latter capital the certainty of a pleasant and lucrative little diplomatic appointment on the Continent; and that the pretty and not unknown lady who sat beside him in the *Café des Ambassadeurs* the other evening, wore on her arm a bracelet of topazes.

CHAPTER NINETEENTH.

It was already Monday afternoon.

Miss Winthrop, after luncheon, which had been a congratulatory meal, inasmuch as Mrs. Odlorne had on this occasion made her first appearance downstairs since the news of her dear Prince Charming's early matrimonial adventure had reached her knowledge, essayed to devote herself to the gen-

eral soothing of her aunt's nerves, which upon the whole appeared to be in a very bad state.

"Nina, I shall never, never recover from it!" exclaimed the little widow, lying back in a violet lace-trimmed *matinée*, and surveying the point of a bronze slipper with a slight mitigation of woe.

"Oh yes, you will, dear," returns the girl, as she busies herself about the library, moving the flowers in the vases, or altering the thousand and one little things scattered about the tables.

"Pray sit down, my dear child; you make me very nervous!"

"I'm sorry, auntie." Miss Winthrop sinks into a seat very near the window.

"Where is he?" murmurs Mrs. Odlorne.

"In the cars, I—hope!"

"Where?"

"Oh—I—whom do you mean, auntie dear?"

"I mean the—the being whom, in my childlike and confiding innocence, my unsuspecting unworldliness, I looked up to as the most perfect example of a God-made man!"

"Oh, Moray Stuart. I do not know."

"And now—now that my poor, unstrung, shattered nerves seem to be a little—just a little—more steady, my dear, I beg of you to give me all the particulars."

"You know all there is to know."

"All!" echoes Drusilla, in amazement. "Nina Winthrop, have you a heart?"

"Doubtful, auntie."

"Do you mean to say that you have renounced that man without one pang—that your woman's soul does not yearn to forgive—to be sure, forgiveness would avail but little—that, in short—I am never to see him again?"

"Auntie, don't be silly!"

"Nina, you have no human feeling; we were so congenial."

"Sorry to hear you say so, dear."

"Intellectually, I mean," Drusilla remarks, severely.

"Oh!"

"And, after all, what is there in life so grand, so perfect, as the companionship of the mind? He understood me!"

"It's too bad, indeed."

"It was a lucky escape for you, wasn't it?" cries the little widow, suddenly altering her tactics, as she finds the first attempt to force the enemy's position unavailing.

"Oh, auntie, it was no escape at all; it was— Auntie, there is a carriage coming up the avenue, and, unless you don't mind seeing anyone in your wrapper—"

"But I do!" cries Drusilla, briskly, as she rises. "I look anything but well in this violet shade: it is too trying by far, even for my complexion. You had better come up and put on another gown, too, Nina; that white and gold smock-frock-looking thing only accentuates your paleness, for you have been very pale these last few days; don't you feel well, my dear?"—going.

"Very well indeed, Aunt Druse; why not?"

"True—" And Mrs. Odlorne was gone as the door-bell rang.

Nina stood by the table, with her hand leaning upon it as he entered the room.

She raises her eyes to greet him, and shudders as she notes the haggardness of his face.

"It is Monday, Miss Winthrop, and I am here to await your further orders," he says, possibly not seeing, assuredly not heeding, the small hand that flutters toward him for an instant only, and is swiftly withdrawn.

"I did not 'order' you to come; I only asked you," she replies very low.

"You are correct: I was not."

"Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you." He takes a chair on the other side of the table as he adds,

"You are quite well, I trust?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"And Mrs. Odlorne?"

"Better: Auntie has been ill."

"Sorry to hear it. And—Mr. Stuart—is well—I suppose?"

"I do not know."

For the first time since he entered the room he now looks at her.

"And you," she hastily adds—"what have you been doing with yourself since—since a week ago this evening?"

"Would you really care to hear?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Well, I've been to Washington once, to Philadelphia three times, and to Boston twice."

"All within a week!"

"Yes—oh yes."

"You did not, then, make very long visits."

"No visits at all. I went to Washington Tuesday morning, and returned in the train leaving there fifteen minutes after I arrived; then I took the boat for Fall River Wednesday night, and came back by land on Thursday; Thursday I went to Philadelphia in the morning, back at night; same programme Friday and Saturday; Sunday I tried Boston again."

"How odd!"

"Very exhilarating indeed!"

"Did you see Miss Peale while you were in town?"

"I have not seen Miss Peale since the evening of her *début*."

"Or Mr. Redlon?"

"Nor Mr. Redlon."

"What is going on—is there any news?"

"I know of none. I have not touched a paper since last Monday morning. I've given up reading the papers; and if a man doesn't read them, what can he know?"

Evidently nothing.

Then he does not know? To be sure, had he known, would he have remained away from her five hours—setting aside five days—after becoming possessed of such knowledge?

No.

Well—

Some things are rather harder to do, to say, than we fancy them to be before the point of action has been reached.

Mr. Van Cortland stares at the dog Cockatoo, who lies dozing on the rug before the fire.

There is a curious inertness about him; he is as dazed, and as stolid and stupefied as a man can be who has partaken of no food whatever for three days and nights, and who has spent the latest week of his existence in sundry public conveyances,

such as railway carriages, steamboats, ferry-boats, and hansoms.

Miss Winthrop rises.

He essays to follow her example.

"Don't rise, please," she says simply; and something in the tone of her voice makes him retain his seat.

She crosses to the window and looks out for a moment; a painful flush dyes all her fair face and her pretty white throat.

Then, with a swift, sudden motion, she turns around, and coming up behind his chair, she lays her two arms about his shoulders.

"Oh, God!" he cries, under his breath, catching at the two cold hands, and trembling from head to foot as he turns his head to look at her.

"Oh, God!" he cries again, faintly. "Is it any pleasure to you to—to—torture me?"

"No, no, no, no!" whispers she. "Jack, don't you know—don't you know—"

"I only know—what you told me was true—that you were the promised wife of another man."

"But I'm not—I'm not. Oh, Jack, take me in your arms, please;" and before the words have left her shamed lips, Nina is held close to a heart whose mad pulsations she can feel distinctly near her own.

"Take you in my arms?" he says—"never to leave them again! Nina, tell it me again—that you are not—that fellow's *fiancée*."

"I am not any one's *fiancée* but—"

"Mine?"

"Yours."

"My darling little child! my baby! my blessed one!"

He gazes into her eyes with eyes whose hunger of looking, it seems, will never find satiety, or even satisfaction; and then presently his craving, gentle, searching, finding lips are laid upon hers, as he holds her prisoned in his arms' fold.

"May I tell you all—all about it?" Miss Winthrop finally is allowed breath to ask.

"About what, my treasure?" smoothing away the soft hair

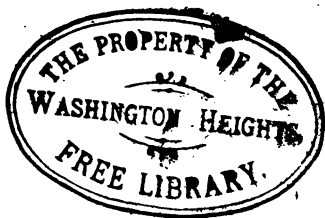
from her brow, and staring straightly into her flushing face with jealous, haggard, happy eyes.

"About my—temporary engagement to—"

"No," he interrupts hoarsely, "not a word of it to-day. Do not let me hear any man's name but mine pass your lips to-day; do not think, or breathe, or remember, or believe any other thing or person on God's earth—just to-day—but me! Ah!" he whispers, kneeling beside her where she is sitting on the lounge, and laying his dark head on her knees, "I have been dead, you know—and starving to death in the place where dead men go. Nina, put your arms about me, lay your mouth on mine—there, now, with it so—say that you will be my wife."

And she does as she is asked to do.

THE END.



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